ELECTRONIC SOUND

THE ELECTRONIC MUSIC MAGAZINE

ISSUE 109

£7.99

Ambient Music
An A To Zzzzz

A

B

C

D

E

F

G

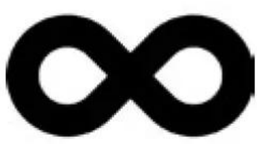
H

I

J

K

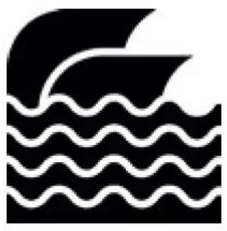
L



M

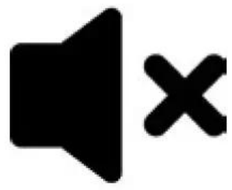
N

O



P

Q



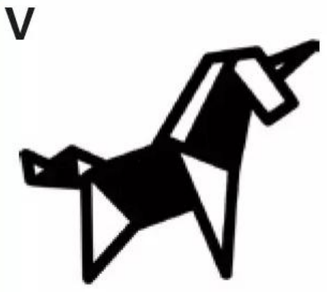
R

S

T

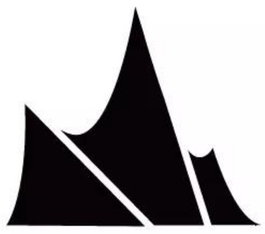
U

V



W

X

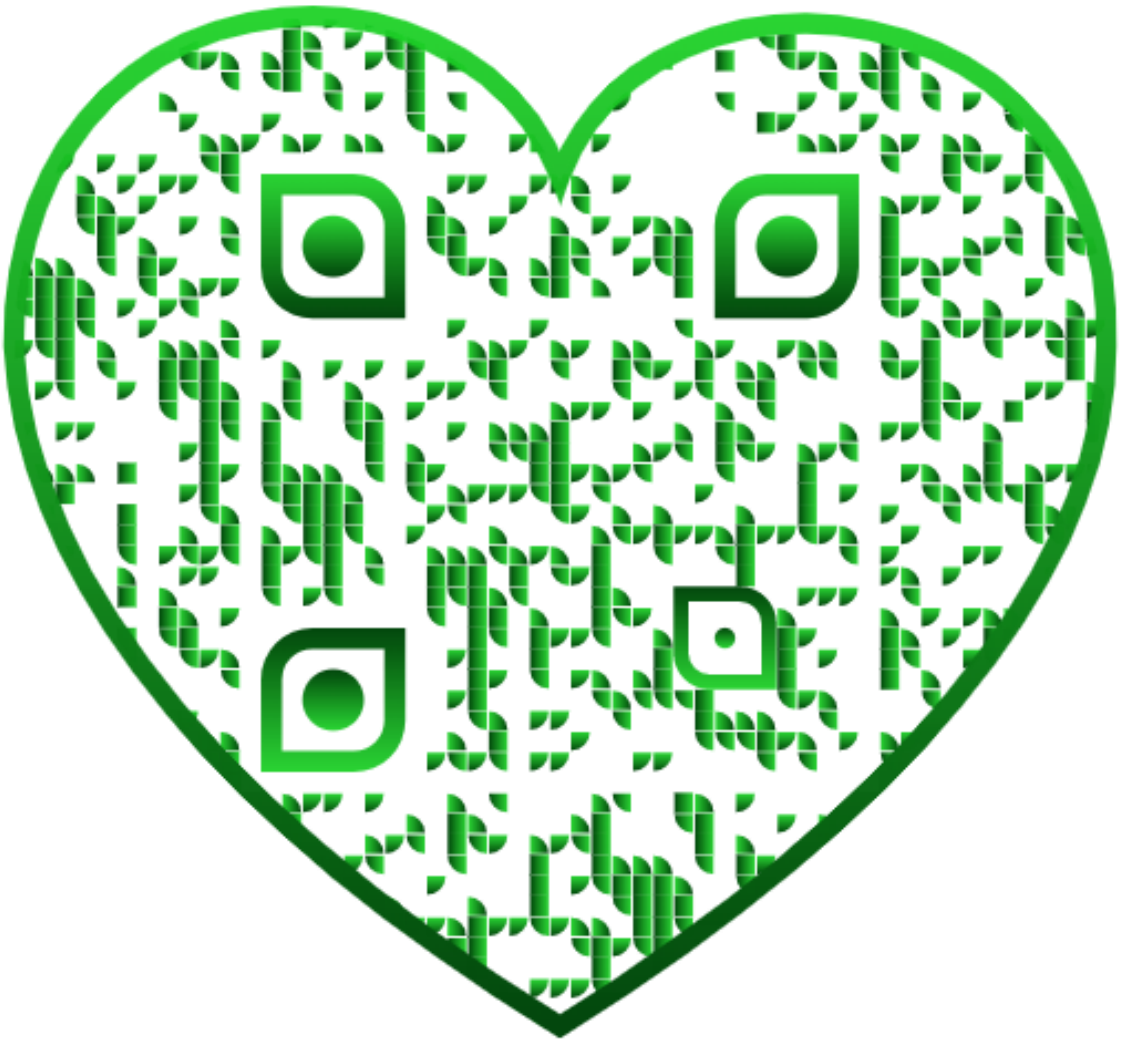


Y

Z

FEVER RAY / DAVID HOLMES / DON LETTS / BAS JAN / PETER HOWELL / UHF / ALEX H DUNCAN / MONTAÑERA

MUSIC FOR AIR PODS



109

WELCOME TO ELECTRONIC SOUND

EDITOR
Push

DEPUTY EDITOR
Mark Roland

ART EDITOR
Mark Hall

FEATURES EDITOR
Velimir Ilic

FRONT EDITOR
Isaak Lewis-Smith

REVIEWS EDITOR
Claire Francis

ARTWORKER
Joel Benjamin

SUB EDITORS
Gill Mullins
Susie Dawes

Can you believe it's 2024? That's obviously a mistake, right? A peculiar little glitch in the space-time continuum. The universe getting itself a bit messed up or something.

Anyway, while we're waiting for that to be sorted out, we're going to gently ease you into whatever year this new year might be with an invitation to immerse yourselves in the lulling and transcendent soundscapes of ambient music. Shoes off please.

There's more to ambient than you might think. Not just confined to a singular definition, it stretches across the genres, defying musical boundaries and embracing a kaleidoscope of influences. In the hustle and bustle of the daily grind – to say nothing of the messed-up universe – it provides a sanctuary, a sonic refuge offering solace and introspection, a journey unfolding with each carefully crafted note, and a profound connection to every nuance of our emotions. Well, unless you're listening to the really dark stuff, of course. In which case, you'll be too busy hiding behind the sofa.

The centrepiece of our celebration of the multifarious facets of ambient music is an extensive A To Z, an alphabetical deep dive into some of the artists, labels, sub-genres, happenings, books and concepts spinning around its core and floating about its splintered outer reaches. It's a curated snapshot rather than a comprehensive list, but we'd like to think that we've covered a lot of bases and you'll hopefully find it an informative and entertaining read.

Alongside our A To Z, we also have a thought-provoking piece from David Stubbs, in which he explores ambient's diverse foundations, and an insightful Q&A with a panel featuring some of the leading figures on the scene, including Alex Paterson, Adam Wiltzie, Marta Salogni and Wolfgang Voigt. No spoilers, but ambient music would seem to be in very rude health indeed. Turn to page 30 for the full status report.

Once you've digested all that, this month's other highlights include a rare interview with Fever Ray's enigmatic maverick Karin Dreijer, who is about to head out on a European tour. We also have celebrated DJ and producer David Holmes talking about his first solo album for 15 years – it's well worth waiting for – while cultural polymath Don Letts reveals the influences that shaped him into the one-man tour de force he is today.

Plus London synthpop outfit Bas Jan, fast-rising Colombian producer Montañera, and an exciting new project called Universal Harmonies & Frequencies that brings together Hieroglyphic Being and Jerzy Maczyński. Oh, and plant and fungi synthesist Alex H Duncan. Yep, you read that right.

And while you're working your way through this month's issue, we're going to tip back our chairs, pop on our eye masks, reach for our headphones, and press play on our rather brilliant 'Ambient Light / Ambient Dark' double CD. Take it away, Mr Eno.

Electronically yours,
Push and Mark

EDITORIAL
editorial@electronicsound.co.uk

ADVERTISING
Chris Dawes
chris@electronicsound.co.uk

SUBSCRIPTIONS
electronicsound.co.uk/subscribe
support@electronicsound.co.uk

PUBLISHED BY
Pam Communications Limited

Studio 20, Capitol House,
Heigham Street, Norwich, NR2 4TE

electronicsound.co.uk
facebook.com/electronicmagazine
twitter.com/electronicmaguk

CONTRIBUTORS
Jeremy Allen, Joe Banks, Imogen Bebb, Ian Berriman, Scott Blixen, Claire Carroll, Paul Clarke, Joe Clay, Bethan Cole, Stephen Dalton, Bob Fischer, Ben Gilbert, Ian Gittins, Carl Griffin, Robert Harris, Jo Hutton, Martin James, Jo Kendall, Andy Linehan, Neil Mason, Finlay Milligan, Ben Murphy, Kris Needs, Sharon O'Connell, Matt Parker, David Pollock, Chris Roberts, Fat Roland, Will Salmon, Joe Silva, Dave Simpson, Will Simpson, Mat Smith, Anton Spice, William Stokes, David Stubbs, James Thornhill, Anthony Thornton, Neil Thomson, Spenser Tomson, Oli Warwick, Ben Willmott, Jonathan Wright

© Electronic Sound 2024. No part of this magazine may be used or reproduced in any way without the prior written consent of the publisher. We may occasionally use material we believe has been placed in the public domain. Sometimes it is not possible to identify and contact the copyright holder. If you claim ownership of something published by us, we will be happy to make the correct acknowledgement. All information is believed to be correct at the time of publication and we cannot accept responsibility for any errors or inaccuracies there may be in that information.

Type set in Univers.

Printed on paper that originated from managed forests, recycled paper or a combination of both.

Pam

Low Carbon Innovation Fund

MIX Paper from responsible sources FSC® C017177

‘SILENT LONDON’

Simon Elvins

2007

INTERVIEW: ISAAK LEWIS-SMITH

“I was studying for a Master’s in Communication Art and Design at the Royal College of Art,” says graphic designer Simon Elvins. “During my second year I’d become interested in how something so intangible as sound could be shown in visual form.

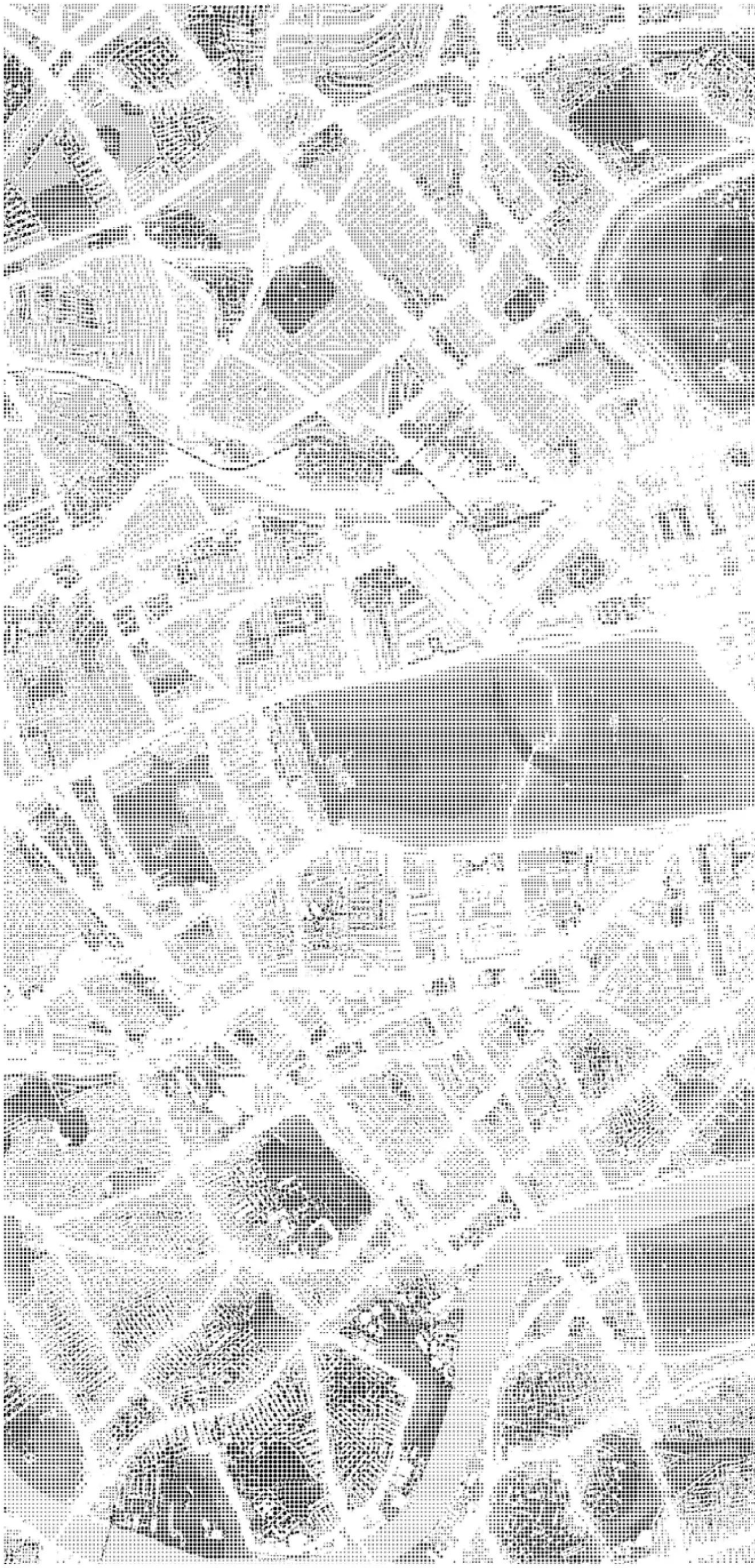
“I was looking far and wide for inspiration – everything from John Cage to the Futurists. Obviously Cage worked a lot around the idea of silence, exploring and questioning what silence really is. There’s a story of when he went into an anechoic chamber at Harvard University and said he heard two sounds in there – a high-pitched one, and a low-pitched one. The engineer told him the high-pitch noise was his nervous system, and the low-pitch one was blood pumping through his body. It made Cage consider how there’s no such thing as silence, that sound is always around you.

“During my research, I came across some datasets about noise pollution in Greater London, recorded by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. I thought it could be interesting to subvert that, as in, we might know where all the noisy places are, but where are the quiet spaces? For a while I was thinking about how to visualise that, and realised I could take the data and flip it on its head. This image you’re looking at is the digital overlay map – the darkest areas show the quietest areas, and the white spaces represent the loudest. The process involved *literally* cutting out the noise.

“Some of what I found was quite interesting. Brownfield sites and ex-industrial spaces – which might not be very nice to look at – could actually be very quiet, simply because they’re often empty and not being used. At the time, Battersea had a lot of those, as you can see on the map. There were some interesting smaller spaces that cropped up too, particularly in central London. Discovering those hidden spots in the city was nice, and it was fascinating to see the inner workings of a city, whether that’s roads running like veins through the picture, or looking at the loud bridges slicing through the river.

“I did visit a few of the more surprising areas on the map. Going to those made me realise that perhaps there isn’t really such a thing as silence – you just notice different things when it’s quiet. That’s interesting to me, because the process becomes more about tuning in and listening to your environment, hearing in a different way, rather than achieving total silence. It depends on the context, but a lot of the time you don’t even realise a place is loud until you experience real quietness. We live in such a visual world that soundscapes, and how they affect us, are so often forgotten.”

For more of Simon Elvins’ work, go to simonelvins.com



READER OFFER

Exclusive reader-only limited editions

HOW DO I GET THE ELECTRONIC SOUND READER OFFER?

A. Buy the latest issue and the Reader Offer from electronicsound.co.uk/shop as a Magazine & Music Bundle for £13.99

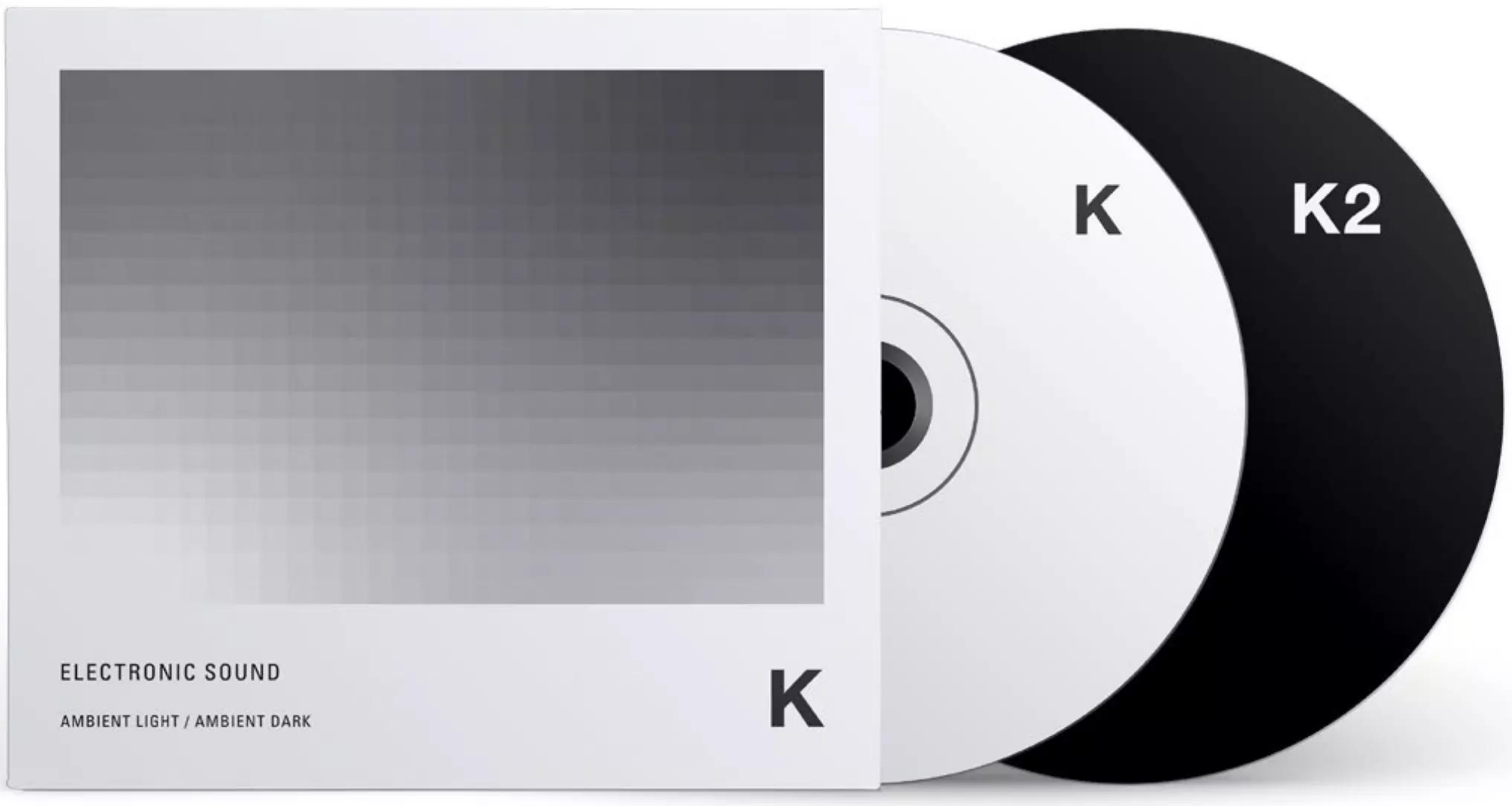
B. Take out our Bundle Subscription to get the magazine and the Reader Offer every month for just £12.99. See electronicsound.co.uk/subscribe for details

C. Visit electronicsound.co.uk/ambient to buy this release on its own for £8.99, but be quick because stocks are strictly limited

Various Artists – 'Ambient Light / Ambient Dark'

24-track double CD in gatefold sleeve

This compilation of ambient tracks moves from light to dark and back again over its two discs, bringing together an eclectic selection of pieces that also tells the story of ambient sound from the 1970s to today. Tune in, turn on, chill out



Disc One

Cluster & Eno
Ho Renomo
A long-time admirer of music from the Moebius/Roedelius circle, Brian Eno sought out Cluster for a studio get-together in mid-1977, resulting in the 'Cluster & Eno' album. 'Ho Renomo', the opening track, might just represent the birth of ambient.

Roedelius
Wenn Der Südwind Weht
As one half of Cluster and one third of Harmonia, Hans-Joachim Roedelius' contribution to ambient music was already immense, but his solo output dwarfs that. This is the title track of his seventh effortlessly seductive album, released in 1981.

Serge Blenner
Phrase IV
French musician Blenner joined the impressive electronic stable at Germany's Sky Records with 'La Vogue', his 1980 debut album. The record has shades of Jean-Michel Jarre's airy genius in its many moments of luscious ambience.

Adelbert Von Deyen
Atmosphere Part II (Edit)
Another Sky signing, Von Deyen's catalogue of electronica errs towards the cosmic. His lengthy, introspective and atmospheric pieces are just the ticket for contemplating the twin moons of the alien planet you may find yourself inhabiting.

John Foxx
The Sea Inside
Mr Foxx is as masterful at composing achingly beautiful ambient pieces as he is delivering fierce metallic electronica. This piece is taken from last year's 'The Arcades Project', on which the piano and twisted electronics co-exist in dreamy and melancholic harmony.

Stars Of The Lid
Articulate Silences
American duo Adam Wiltzie and Brian McBride named themselves after "your own personal cinema, located between your eye and eyelid". Active from the mid-1990s until McBride's death in August 2023, their gorgeous drone pieces occupy the neoclassical realm.

Pauline Anna Strom
Quiet Joy
Also known as Trans-Millenia Consort, Strom started making music in the early 1980s with a DIY set-up in her San Francisco home, where she was also a reiki master and healer. After a long lay-off, she returned to making music just before her death in 2020. 'Quiet Joy' came out in 1982.

Marta Salogni & Tom Relleen
Desert Glass
This track is from Salogni and Relleen's excellent 2023 long-player, 'Music For Open Spaces', which was recorded in London, Cornwall and California. Salogni is a sought-after engineer and producer, her credits including Depeche Mode's 'Memento Mori'. Relleen, who founded the Phonica record shop, died in 2020 at the age of just 42.

Sofie Birch
Hypnogogia (Featuring Dolphin Midwives)
Danish musician Birch describes her work as "soft ambient" and is a believer in the healing nature of sound. Taken from her 2022 'Holotropica' album, 'Hypnogogia' features American "experimental ritual harpist" Dolphin Midwives, aka Sage Fisher.

Tim Hecker
Winter Cop
Canadian composer Hecker has collaborated with the likes of Jóhann Jóhannsson and Ben Frost. His debut album, 2001's 'Haunt Me, Haunt Me Do It Again', began with the chilly and glitchy 'Music For Tundra' suite. 'Winter Cop' is one of the many highlights of 'No Highs', his most recent release.

Patricia Wolf
Under A Glass Bell
Wolf is a sound artist and field recordist based in Portland, Oregon. 'Under A Glass Bell', from her 2022 release 'See-Through', is a gently swaying ocean bed alive with twinkling light and reverb, drawing you into her hypnotic inner world.

Dasha Rush
Light And Dust
Taken from Rush's recent 'Contemplating' album, the serene pads of 'Light And Dust' are constantly being buffeted by strange sounds, barely present but deep and resonant. As her website puts it, "In her strange and twisted world, the machines are the protagonists of a neo-romanticism, weaved with human dreams".

Legowelt
Botanical Garden Follow A Strange Illusion
This track features in the soundtrack to 'Ambient Trip Commander', a fab animated movie by Dutch musician and artist Legowelt. It's free to watch on YouTube. The main character, Samantha, works in a synth shop, and a lunchtime visit to the botanical gardens triggers some major weirdness.

Mark St John Ellis & Lisa Gerrard
The Empty Vessel 013
'The Empty Vessel' is a haunting 14-part work by multimedia artist Ellis, aka Elijah's Mantle, which blends ethereal vocals, deep bass drones, and chiming notes created with singing bowls. '013', the penultimate segment, sees Ellis teaming up with Dead Can Dance legend Lisa Gerrard.

Disc Two

William Basinski
dlp 2.1
A powerfully elegiac contribution from American sound artist Basinski, 'dlp 2.1' is made up of tape loops gradually degrading. It stands as a metaphor for loss and death, yet somehow captures a life-affirming beauty as it progresses.

Marta De Pascalis
Equal To No Weight At All
There's a vastness and a heaviness to 'Equal To No Weight At All'. The track appears on De Pascalis' latest release, 'Sky Flesh', every element of which the Italian musician and sound designer conjured up from one instrument, a Yamaha CS-60.

KMRU
CPR-12*
Nairobi-born, Berlin-based sound artist Joseph Kamaru was commissioned by Helsinki curatorial and commissioning agency PUBLICS to produce 'Stupor', a work consisting of three lengthy pieces. The first of these is 'CPR-12*', which slides and slurs for a dozen deliciously disorienting minutes.

Penelope Trappes
Heavenly Spheres
'Heavenly Spheres' captures "the sound of dust motes momentarily caught in a shaft of moonlight, of spirits pushing through from another realm". That's what Electronic Sound said about the title cut of Trappes' latest release. Quite right too.

Phew
Snow And Pollen
Japanese experimental vocalist Hiromi Moritani made her earliest recordings as Phew with Conny Plank, Holger Czukay and Jaki Liebezeit. 'Snow And Pollen', a collage of disembodied voices, radio static and snippets of tunes, is on 'New Decade', her 2021 long-player for Mute.

Philip Jeck & Chris Watson
Coop
Philip Jeck, who died in 2022, employed turntables and looping devices to create his pieces, including 'Vinyl Requiem', which required an incredible 180 Dansette record players. This collaboration with revered field recordist Chris Watson incorporates sounds captured at a rail crossing in Yorkshire.

Bill Laswell & Pete Namlook
From The Earth To The Ceiling – Part 1
Laswell (bassist, co-writer of Herbie Hancock's 'Rockit', avant-garde lynchpin) and Namlook (who founded the Fax imprint) recorded this as part of their five-LP 'Outland' series. "He told me about the start of his career, playing guitar by a river," Laswell once said of the much-missed Namlook. "I think that's where his ambient obsession began."

Legion
The Somnambulist
Andrew Lagowski, the artist also known as SETI, Project Ghost and Clans Of The Alphane Moon, has released over 40 albums since the 1980s. The restless 'The Somnambulist', recorded in 1993, sends this collection into new depths of darkness.

Woob
Wuub (Edit)
'Woob 1194', Paul Frankland's first Woob release, was a firm favourite with the 1990s downtempo crowd, thanks in part to the blissful 'Wuub'. Well, blissful once you get past the sample from 'Night Of Dark Shadows', Dan Curtis' 1971 horror film.

The Orb
9 Elms Over River Eno (Channel 9)
We close with a magnificent track from The Orb's 2016 'COW / Chill Out World!' album, Alex Paterson bringing us full circle by namechecking Sir Brian of Eno. With its 'Sailing By'-esque opening, seagulls and bursts of CB radio, plus some super-soft beats, it's classic Orb in the house. Night night.

THE FRONT

3 Welcome

4 Opening Shot

6 Reader Offer

11 David Hale

12 Enigmas

15 Kónguló

16 Hannah Thurlow, Needs Must

18 Peter Howell

21 Viscount

22 Don Letts

25 Fat Roland

26 Einstürzende Neubauten

FEATURES

30 Ambient

54 Fever Ray

60 David Holmes

66 Universal Harmonies & Frequencies

70 Bas Jan

74 Montañera

76 Alex H Duncan

THE BACK

78 Loula Yorke

80 Cat Tyson Hughes, Dau, ØjeRum, Robag Wruhme

81 Jan Nemeček, Hassan Abou Alam, Infant, Wallace

82 The Home Current, ‘Spectra Ex Machina’, Miguel Pedro, Alien Kin

83 Musique Infinie, Alexander Tillegreen, Dark Fidelity HIFI, Mike Sheridan

84 Wil Bolton, Teresa Winter, BITW, Conflux Coldwell

85 ‘Visions Vol 2’, Eva Sajanova & Dominik Suchy, Miradasvacas, Dijf Sanders

86 Cosmic Analog Ensemble, ‘Maloca: Vol 2’, Alexander R Cargill Esq

87 Michal Turtle, Mark Van Hoen, ‘To Light A Candle Is To Cast A Shadow’

88 Mining, Black Devil Disco Club, Yīn Yīn

89 Colin Newman, Kees Berkers

90 The Twins, Ariel Kalma, Jeremiah Chiu & Marta Sofia Honer

91 Pablo Diserens & The Ocean Comm/uni/ty, ‘Pop Ambient 2024’, The Fauns

92 Thought Bubble, L Petitgand + Scanner + Geins’t Naït, Kit Grill

93 Mueran Humanos, Moolakii Club Audio Interface

94 JD Twitch, ‘Optimo 25 (Parts 1 & 2)’

95 Hiroshi Yoshimura, ‘Primary Forest 01’, Stellarays

96 Paranoid London, Cult Of Wedge, ‘Attack Release Volume One’

97 Speedy J, Kreidler

98 Mueran Humanos

TEENAGE TRICKS

Next-gen pocket sampler might be TE's best yet

Teenage Engineering have taken their popular Pocket Operator series in a new direction with the KO II. The sequel to the ubiquitous PO-33 KO!, which its Swedish producers claim to be the world's most sold sampler, the KO II has ditched the exclamation mark in its name, and with good reason.

This is now a far more *serious* music-making machine, offering oodles of sampling capability and power, as well as a completely redesigned sequencer. The KO II presents many of its functions in a highly accessible interface, with a selection of pre-loaded keys, drums and bass to choose from, plus an array of predictably stellar effects to embellish your sounds with.

Twelve generously sized pressure and velocity-sensitive pads furnish the panel of the device, which takes AAA batteries alongside USB-C. There's an onboard speaker and microphone and a lovely colour screen straight out of the Pocket Operator playbook, displaying quirky graphics and illustrations. While many have complained about Teenage Engineering's exorbitant rates in the past, the KO II is worth every penny of its £299 price tag.

teenage.engineering

PULSE

DAVID HALE

Prog-soaked pop from American prodigy

WHO?

Growing up in New Mexico, 20-year-old percussionist and producer David Hale began his musical career by uploading drum covers of Brand X and Genesis songs to YouTube. After recording his 2019 debut album 'Hale Damage' while still only a teenager, he has since shown a knack for acutely altering his sound from release to release, yet always remaining true to his core influences of juggernauts such as Peter Gabriel, Phil Collins, Thundercat and Tame Impala.

WHY DAVID HALE?

HIs first outing was influenced by a deep adoration for the rollicking drums and triumphant, trumpeting synths of 'Duke'-era Genesis. But 2021's follow-up, 'Something Peculiar', saw him park his Collins fanaticism to negotiate a rather more Floydian arena – think moody, disjointed funk grooves held together alongside pealing guitar solos and piercing, hair-raising electronics. All in all, they stay with you long after the music has come to an end.

TELL US MORE...

Despite Hale's evident fascination with the musical formulae pioneered by his prog predecessors, there's so much about this artist that's original and down to the bone. He has an impeccable ear for arrangement, as demonstrated by his latest album 'Paradigm', which he self-released last September. Tracks like the boldly compassionate 'Stay By My Side' and the euphorically bittersweet lead single 'Wish I Knew' arrive imbued with lush, well-defined synth textures that never stray so far as to become mawkish. Funkier moments like 'Under Control' don't falter, so shrewd is Hale's judgement when it comes to the production of addictive, squelchy, syncopated bass synth. As the years pass, Hale's music becomes ever more personal, and it's becoming clear that he doesn't need to rely on any other artist to make music worth listening to.

IMOGEN BEBB

'Paradigm' is out now via Bandcamp

SEM SOS

German city preserves iconic music studio

Good news has arrived from Cologne, where the famed Studio for Electronic Music (SEM) has been purchased by the city and saved from demolition. The studio – which was launched in 1953 by the public broadcasting institution Westdeutscher Rundfunk Köln, and managed by Karlheinz Stockhausen between 1963 and 1971 – will now become a centre for contemporary musicians experimenting with electronics.

"Electronic music can't be thought away from either new music or pop music, and its core lies in Cologne," said the city's mayor Henriette Reker, who signed the transfer agreement. "The city is proud to fill the studio with new life and carry on the cultural heritage." Yes folks – *that* is how you do it. **wdr.de**

WITH BITS

Little rocket for your electronic arsenal

Los Angeles' 1010music are on a hot streak with their Nanobox line of colourful yet diminutive polyphonic mini-synthesisers. The newest addition, called the Tangerine, is a compact streaming sampler capable of handling recording and playback, clip launching, slicing and looping. It's equipped with a nifty onboard touchscreen and can stream samples up to a whopping 4GB, as well as load multi-sample banks of over 500 recordings for accurate instrument reproduction. For a piece of kit that weighs about the same as a packet of Hobnobs (just under 300 grams), it's a sure-fire way to add some serious sonic punch to your set-up, and for only £400. **1010music.com**

ENIGMAS

Sweeping the world's forgotten corridors of sound, **Scott Blixen** sets his sights on **Barış Manço**

It's not like we need an excuse to commend the visionary music made in mid-1970s Turkey. The arrival of synthesisers in Istanbul coincided with the nation's psych explosion. But what prompts me to write about Barış Manço, having said goodbye to a trying year, is his freak-a-tronic album '2023'.

By 1975, when this perplexing record hit the streets, Manço was already a successful pop star and TV host. It's a measure of the man and the times that presenting a future-facing concept LP to his mainstream audience wasn't deemed career suicide. As with other giants of Turkish folk and rock, Manço's first album was a hits compilation.

Perhaps feeling an urge to follow it with something more ambitious, '2023' takes us on a trip to some eccentric and far-out places. While it may be folly to claim he reached the dizzying heights scaled by Erkin Koray's 1974 LP 'Elektronik Türküler' or the two breathtaking albums Selda Bağcan released in 1976, no other young Turk gave themselves as completely to the synthesiser as Manço did.

Turkish music of this era reveals how psychedelia and electronics fuse seamlessly with the country's indigenous folk music. '2023' is a spacey manifestation of these cross-cultural elements. Manço handily listed the gear he used on the sleeve, which included a Korg 700S, an ARP Solina String synthesiser and an elektronik davul (that's a drum machine to you and me).

Running water and wobbly synth strings introduce 'Kayalarin Oğlu', over which Manço speaks portentously. You could be forgiven for thinking The Human League then crash the party, as a drum machine and doomy Korg slice through the atmosphere. The title track is an intoxicating and progressive piece that charts a course through diverse electronic soundscapes. 'Uzun İnce Bir Yoldayım' is a pretty-pretty ballad underscored with filter-sweeping synth and flute. The 13-minute epic 'Baykoca Destanı' blends birdsong, Turkish strings and gorgeous, synthesised arabesques.

Although Manço's band Kurtalan Ekspres are stunning throughout, nothing prepares you for the smokey funk workout they unleash on the closing track 'Kol Bastı'. As the album cruises to a languid conclusion, a horny horn section and wah-wah guitar trade licks, while Manço indulges in a victory lap synth solo.

Tragically, Barış Manço didn't live long enough to experience life in the 21st century – he died in 1999. His vision of the future was exultant and inspiring, though, and who wouldn't prefer that to the shabby shit show we're currently enduring?

שְׁאוֹל
SHEOL

ALMA D-HŠUKA

Τάρταρος
TARTARUS

IRKALLA

HEI TĀ BE

URANGA-C

PANDÆMONIUM

LULL

JOURNEY THROUGH UNDERWORLDS

黄泉ノ国
YOMI
NO KUNI

دوزخ
DUZAKH

GEHINN

NIFLHEI

MICTLA

The genre-defining 1993 album from LULL
- the pioneering isolationist, dark ambient
project of MICK HARRIS of SCORN,
FRET, ex-NAPALM DEATH.

Mixed by Justin K Broadrick (GODFLESH).
Remastered by Martin Bowes (The Cage Studios)
from the original recordings.
CD in digipak. Art by Abby Helasdottir (Gydja).

WWW.COLDSPRING.CO.UK

COLDSPRING.BANDCAMP.COM

STRIP TEASE

Touch-sensitive Eurorack module should be top of your wish list

Innovative electronics developer Bela are experts in “beautiful interactions with sensors and sound” – a maxim marvellously demonstrated by their latest Gliss Eurorack module. A capacitive touch sensor neatly fitting into a 4HP panel, Gliss can take physical gestures and turn them into control voltage signals to send to other modules. And beyond that, it can do almost anything you can dream up, including recording gestures up to 75 seconds long, morphing into a miniature touch keyboard and sequencer, or oscillating your drawings at audio rate as wavetables. It’s open source and a total bargain at £145. **bela.io**

FANTASTIC FOUR

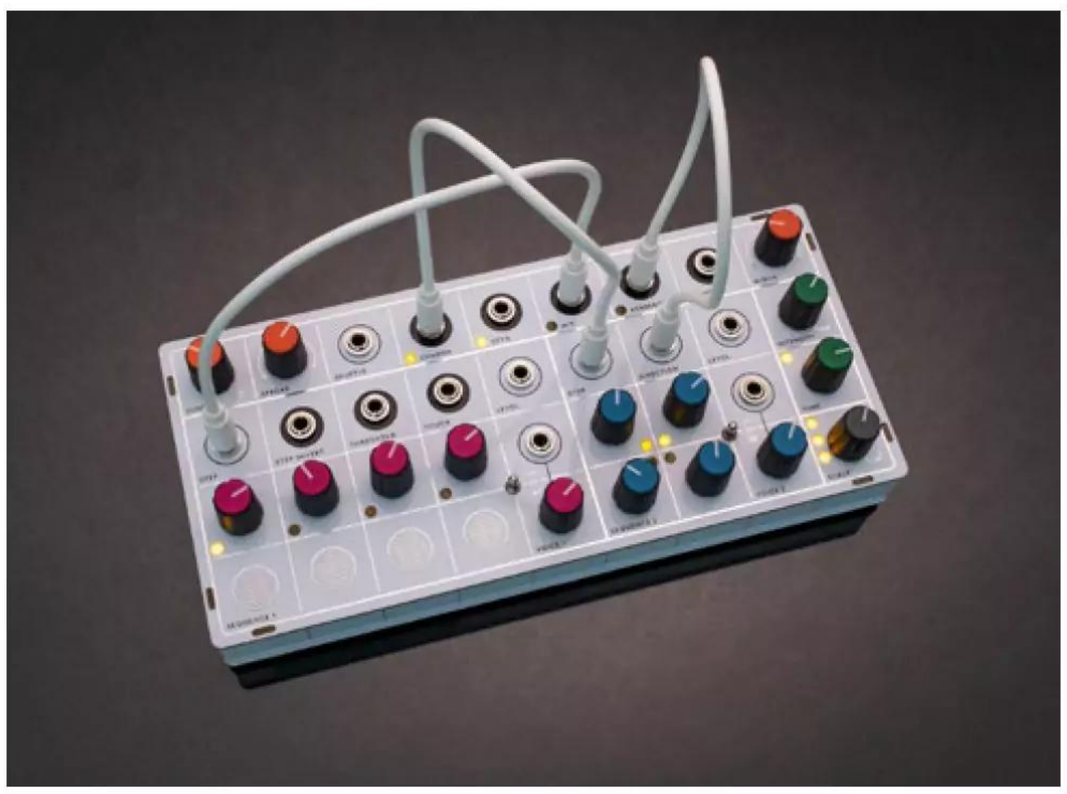
Swish wireless monitors from Danish pioneers

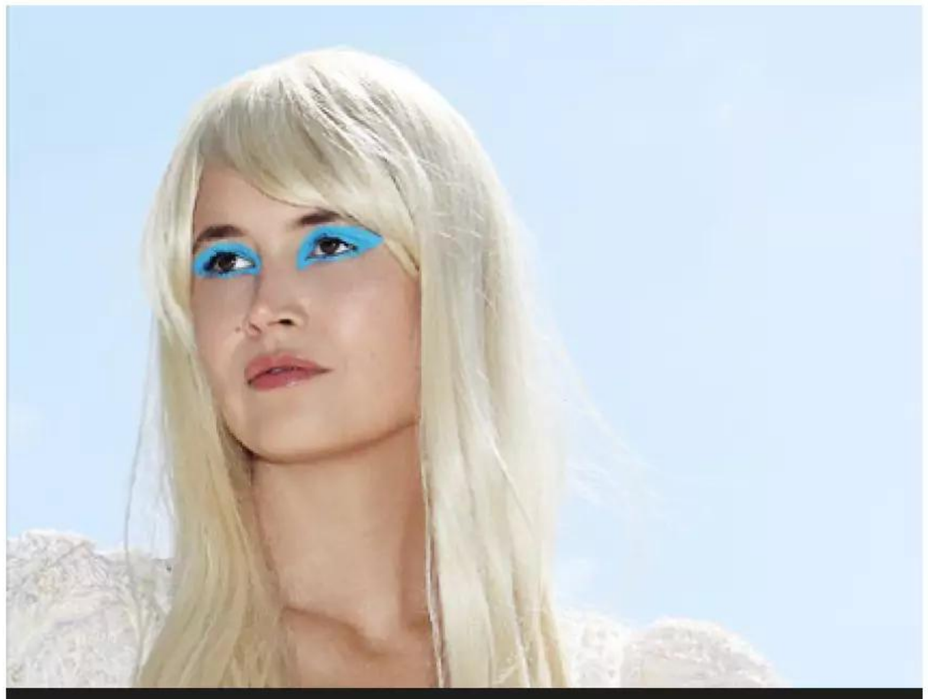
With their new Unit-4, AIAIAI have duly anointed us with the world's first portable wireless studio monitors. Pretty impressive they are too, having been made in collaboration with Panter&Tourron, the Swiss design agency. Featuring Bluetooth compatibility, they offer bass extension down to an impressive 40Hz and a flat frequency response from 50Hz to 20kHz, with batteries that stay juiced for up to 20 hours. And on top of all that, the main components are made from swappable recycled plastics, so you can easily disassemble and upgrade. Not too shabby for £700. **aiaiai.audio**

SPACE FREQ

Cosmic semi-modular fun from Modern Sounds

Michigan's Modern Sounds have debuted their very first instrument, the Pluto, and it sure is a nifty little gadget. A digital semi-modular with five channels of modulation – each named after the five moons of Pluto – its design ethos isn't a million light years from Teenage Engineering's OP-1 (indeed Modern Sounds openly draw inspiration from the same dinky 1980s Casio instruments as the Swedish company). The rechargeable Pluto presents two voices, two sequencers, a mini-keyboard and even onboard effects, so it can be used as a standalone instrument, be patched into other modular gear or process external audio. A powerhouse package at £529, UK readers can order one from Elevator Sound. **elevatorsound.com**





PULSE

KÓNGULÓ

Iceland's electropop star in the making

WHO?

Kónguló is the latest moniker of Icelandic composer and producer Herdís Stefánsdóttir, and her new avenue for channelling dark electropop. Formerly half of the duo East Of My Youth, Kónguló shows Stefánsdóttir stepping out on her own, though still with an ear to collaboration. Two of her previous singles were made with fellow Icelandic producer Salka Valsdóttir, aka Neonme, who also penned the lyrics to her latest track, 'The Water In Me'. Add Stefánsdóttir's longtime collaborator Baldur Hjörleifsson into the mix, and you've got one precociously poppy project.

WHY KÓNGULÓ?

Kónguló touts a particularly unnerving brand of electropop, resting somewhere between the dystopian Futurism of Arca and the crushing noise of Sunn O))) collaborator Randall Dunn. Foot-tapping existentialism? Dread-infused bangers? All of the above, and more. 'The Water In Me', for instance, involves five minutes of brooding sonic menace that steadily expands to arrive at a retro-futurist, techno-infused soundscape, ornamented by Neonme's fragile musings. "This was one of those beasts of a track that took a long time to make," says Stefánsdóttir. "I felt Neonme would be a perfect fit for it. We have this beautiful soul connection when it comes to harmonies and production."

TELL US MORE...

The name Stefánsdóttir might be familiar to you for her high-flying work as a composer. Having studied film scoring at New York University, she went on to intern for the late, great Oscar-nominated composer Jóhann Jóhannsson while he was working on the soundtrack to 2016 sci-fi epic 'Arrival'. She has since lent her hand to several shorts, as well as some formidable television productions – not least Apple TV's 'The Essex Serpent' and Hulu's 'Y: The Last Man', which follows the only surviving male on a post-apocalyptic Earth.

WILLIAM STOKES

'The Water In Me' is out now on Marvaõa

PULSE

HANNAH THURLOW

Indie guitarist turns wired-up producer

WHO?

An artist with the technical nous of a past master *and* the raw energy of a neophyte, Hannah Thurlow is a very special find. The London producer has previously worked as a commercial sound designer for high-end fashion brands such as Givenchy and Vivienne Westwood, while also spending the best part of the 2010s with indie alt-rock band 2:54. But in 2020, Thurlow set up a home studio as sanctuary from the pandemic, et voilà, just three years later, she's become one to watch, and then some.

WHY HANNAH THURLOW?

Founding 2:54 in 2010 alongside her sister Colette, they released their self-titled debut album two years later. It earned them a contract with Bella Union plus studio time with PJ Harvey knobs man Rob Ellis and Yeah Yeah Yeahs' Nick Zinner, who they joined for an alternative '41 Strings' recital at the Royal Festival Hall in 2014. But that period sits in juxtaposition with her newer productions, and Thurlow now harbours an obsession with Elektron drum machines and vintage Roland synths.

TELL US MORE...

Released in November, Thurlow's 'Grip' EP begins with the crisp and tactile 'Plate', which has a touch of latter-day Aphex Twin about it. Then come the warmer hues and denser textures of 'Maybe' and 'Spin Change', building to the crescendo of 'Aspect', the slightly anxious, skitterish broken beat of which is truly captiviating. Equipped with an ear for catchy sound design – something which she no doubt developed through her previous commercial work – Thurlow's foray into compositional dance music has also led to her to establish the Hackney club night Eterna alongside resident DJ, Herberta. Look out for their future events to get a taste of what this exciting artist is all about.

JEREMY ALLEN

'Grip' is out now on Blue Cupid

NEEDS MUST

Freewheeling through time and space, **Kris Needs** continues his adventures in sound. This month: **Plus 8**

When I was editing DJ tipsheet Dance Music Report at Tommy Boy Records' New York offices in 1989, I became aware of a stonking new techno label emanating from Windsor, Ontario called Plus 8 Records. Close enough to infect Detroit, it had been started by bedroom producer and local DJ Richie Hawtin, who ignited an acid revival through his savage deployment of the Roland TB-303, pumping radioactive new blood into the Motor City's beleaguered electronic scene.

Plus 8 swiftly gained steam, boasting a fervent UK following by the time I returned to these shores the following year, as Hawtin unleashed codpiece-mangling dancefloor destroyers as FUSE and Circuit Breaker, joined by global luminaries including Kenny Larkin, Spawn and Speedy J. Always gripped by global ambitions, Hawtin hooked up with Mute Records' techno outlet NovaMute, first releasing the 'Probe Mission 1' EP sampler.

It was a pleasure to interview the articulately passionate young chap with blond hair and specs several times in the early 1990s for NME and Echoes.

"My sound is pretty much a hybrid between techno and acid," he told me. "A lot of the new records have no feeling or groove – unlike the original Detroit stuff. That's the big part that's being carried on through my stuff, it all creates a good groove. If you can create a good rhythm you can listen to it for an hour."

In June 1993, FUSE's debut album 'Dimension Intrusion' appeared as the fifth release in Warp's 'Artificial Intelligence' series, an acclaimed electronic landmark that's just been reissued, and it took his music to another level with its panoramic update of the original Detroit spirit. Hawtin then went on to launch his fearsome Plastikman persona through Mute with 'Spastik' and reissued the 'Sheet One' LP – those who witnessed him demolish Andrew Weatherall and Nina Walsh's Sabresonic night still tremble at the memory.

Since then, Hawtin has become an ever-evolving global techno icon who, with beautiful synchronicity, wrote the foreword to my late partner Helen Donlon's definitive Ibiza history 'Shadows Across The Moon' in 2015. We were honoured to attend his ENTER. night there, swooning to him still on mind-blowing DJ form.

What a tumultuous year 2023 was, rounding off with the release of Woodleigh Research Facility's triumphant 'Phonox Nights'. With Nina's upcoming biography, more mayhem-packed podcasts and other new projects unfolding, 2024 is charged for unfettered lift-off. Have a belter yourselves!

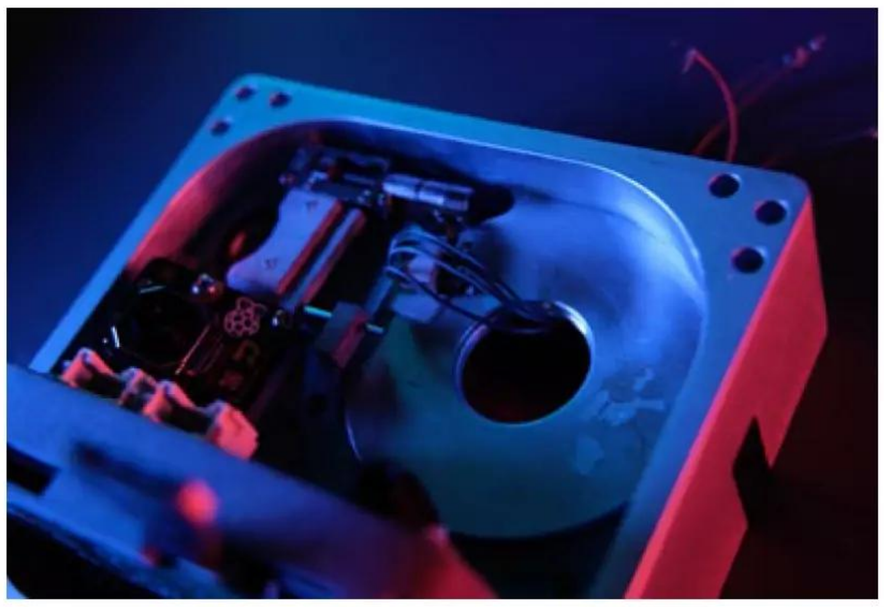
'Dimension Intrusion' is out now on Warp

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, WE ARE FLOATING IN…

Synth reaches Earth's orbit in a world first

A few years ago, New York instrument designers Physical Synthesis came up with a simple yet highly intriguing question – is it possible to make a synthesiser that could work in space? The answer was "yes", and after months of research and development, it has now arrived in the form of the Blue Marble, a unique machine which is able to function in zero-gravity environments by using a floating marble and sensors to create data. And it looks flipping marvellous, if you ask us.

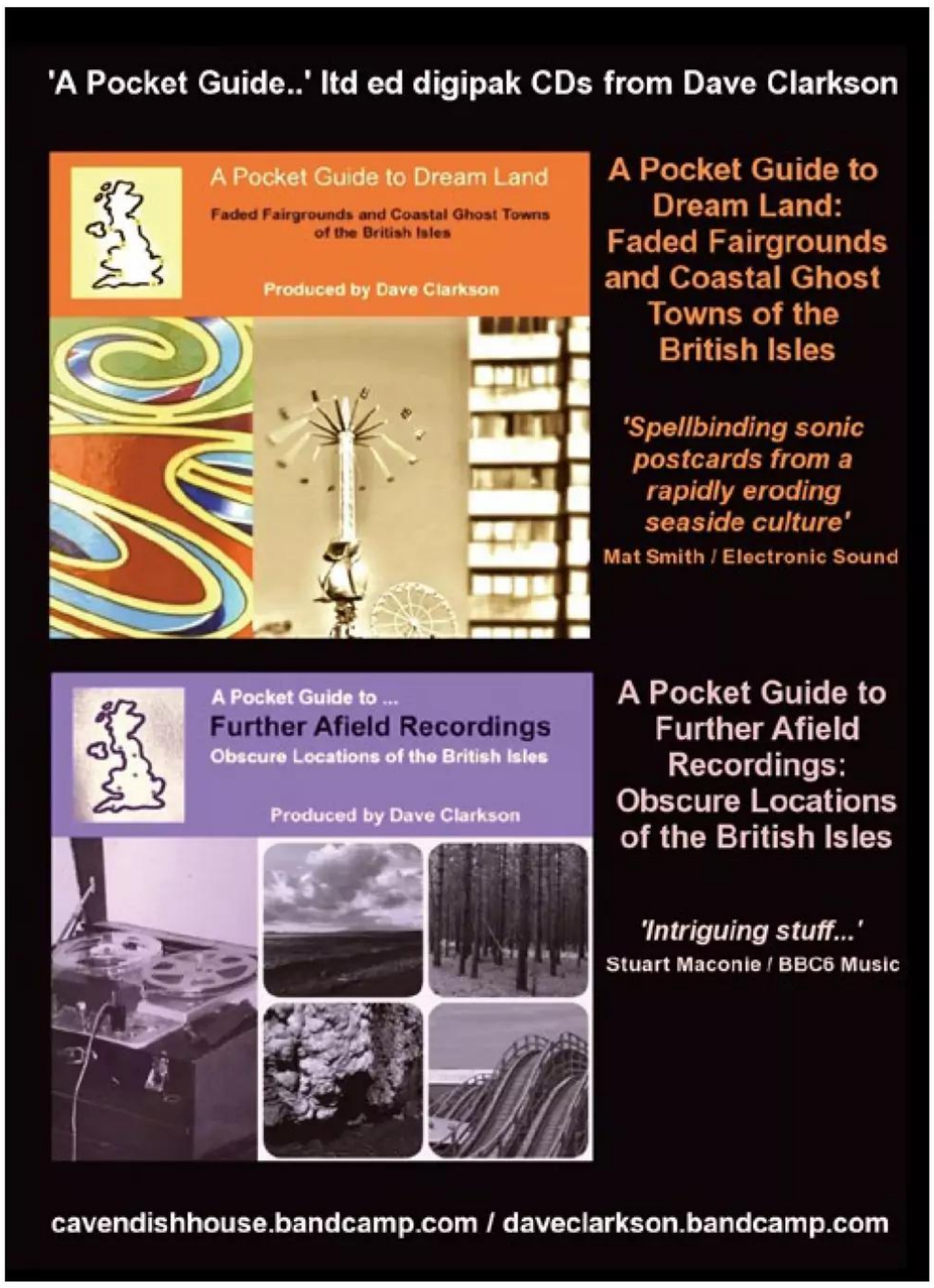
The Blue Marble was finally launched on 11 November 2023, onboard SpaceX's Falcon rocket, and Physical Synthesis are now in the process of designing a web-based interface and VST plug-in which will allow users to make music using the data. The project has already been supported by the likes of YouTube synth star Andrew Huang and American musician Benn Jordan, among others, and you too can join them in helping fund the project. **physical-synthesis.com**



I SHOT THE SHERIFF

Phone lens for cinematically good snaps

If you've ever wanted your phone photos to look like a Wes Anderson or JJ Abrams movie, but don't have a Hollywood budget, boy have we got a gadget for you! This clever 1.33x anamorphic lens was developed by the photography nerds at Moment, and allows your phone's camera to shoot in a cinematic style, even adding a bit of lens flare (in blue and gold) for the true Abrams experience. This isn't a novelty bit of kit – it's made from aerospace-grade metal – and £120 is a snip compared to shelling out for a DSLR. **shopmoment.com**



In 1977, the BBC Radiophonic Workshop's **Peter Howell** recorded 'Through A Glass Darkly', a stunning album of synth-heavy prog rock. The jewel in the crown? '**A Lyrical Adventure**', the 19-minute epic sprawling across the entirety of Side One

INTERVIEW: BOB FISCHER

"Absolutely nobody knew what I was doing. I'd said to [BBC Radiophonic Workshop co-founder] Desmond Briscoe that I wanted to record something, and if he'd allow me to do it alongside my other work, that I'd like to use Studio Four, the rock music studio downstairs at Maida Vale. He said that was fine, providing I organised it myself.

"Generally speaking, he was very accommodating of anything that would broaden our horizons. I wanted to prove I wasn't just a second fiddle guitarist to Paddy Kingsland and that I could actually find my way around a piano – and Studio Four had a Steinway! This was 1977, three years after I'd joined the Radiophonic Workshop. I was getting used to working there, but I was feeling like I was in Paddy's shadow a little bit.

"'A Lyrical Adventure' is an allegory about good and evil. My original album title was 'In The Kingdom Of Colours' and there was a very loose outline of a story. The piano is the protagonist, and you could say the first five minutes are the arrival, taking in these new surroundings. Then there's a visit to the king in a courtly palace, with pageantry and flags. Some rather threatening drums mark the entrance of more malevolent forces, and the rest is a battle between the piano and those forces. It was rather nice to think of the piano being in a landscape made from electronics. Everything developed from there.

"Up until that time at the Radiophonic Workshop, I'd been presented with commissions – 'Could you write some music for this sequence?'. And I would just respond to the requirements of the film. But writing in a vacuum is harder, and that's why I started out with some fairly basic structural ideas. I was aiming for half an album, 28 or 29 minutes – it was the age of prog rock! One of my favourite records is 'Thick As A Brick' by Jethro Tull, which I still absolutely adore. The musicianship on it is incredible.

"I worked in parallel with my other jobs, and it was pretty hard. It took an embarrassingly long time – probably about three months – working in the evenings when there were no bookings in Studio Four. I was on my own, so I had to start the multitrack tape machine in the control room a minute-and-a-half before I wanted to play, then run through two sealed doors into the studio, put my headphones on, hear the cue coming up, play the piano and then go back. That cycle went on and on!

"There were also 12 fire doors between the Radiophonic Workshop studios and Studio Four, and they were always closed. The fire officers ruled the roost in those days! I'd be carrying the ARP Odyssey synth through them all, thinking, 'Is this worth the effort?'. But I stuck with it. The ARP features quite a lot on the album. It was a fantastic mainstay. Another synth I really enjoyed

using was the Yamaha SY-2. It was very basic, but it had a soprano sax and a flute sound, and I used it for a lot of the thematic lines in the first half of 'A Lyrical Adventure'.

"I tried to extend the concept onto Side Two of the album, but it was more of an afterthought. There's a track called 'Caches Of Gold', and then 'Colour Rinse' was intended as an antidote to Side One. 'Magenta Court' was actually named after a block of flats close to Maida Vale.

"I walked past it once, after a swimming session with the now even more mega-famous Angela Rippon! I used to go swimming at a sports club in Ladbroke Grove, and on one occasion we were the only two people in the pool. She was gliding serenely through the water, almost as though she was running on a battery. Whereas I've never been a great swimmer, so I was on the other side making a hell of a fuss. On the way back, I walked through a series of blocks of flats, and each of them was named after a colour – Violet Court, Magnolia Court, Magenta Court – and I thought it all sounded a bit King Crimson.

"The word 'allegory' frightened [BBC Records producer] Mike Harding. He was a very direct Glaswegian guy, very experienced at what he was doing, and I was fully aware of the fact that I'd arrived from this madhouse in Maida Vale with these high-flying ideas about a long track taking up the entire first side of an album. He wrote a publicity quote: 'It has been compared to "Tubular Bells".' I asked him, 'Who's compared it to "Tubular Bells"?'. He said, 'I have…'

"He wasn't happy with the title, though, he thought it was a bit twee and naff. This was most unlike him as a character, but he then said, 'I always think biblical references work well'. He didn't come across as a churchgoer, but he came up with three or four! I didn't like any of them because I wanted 'In The Kingdom Of Colours', but we ended up with 'Through A Glass Darkly'. I was disappointed and I felt it undermined the original concept of the album, but we went ahead.

"I actually listened to the album yesterday. My immediate reaction was that Side One stands up pretty well, but Side Two is a bit of a curate's egg. One thing that did occur to me, and it's a bit sad really, is how much the digital world has stunted our technique. My piano playing is nothing like as good as that now!"

'Through A Glass Darkly' is out now on Silva Screen and available to order from electronicsound.co.uk/shop

IT'S ABOUT TIME

Sweet dreams with this totally mad AI-powered clock

If you thought horological technology had peaked donkeys years ago, meet Loftie. Known as "the internet's favourite clock", this device was engineered in consultation with sleep scientists, and uses a two-phase alarm to simulate your body's natural waking process. It also comes with "updatable wellness content, including breath work, sound baths, and guided meditation", a smart lamp, a Bluetooth speaker and customisable alarm tones ("non-alarming" alarm sounds included). Still, most impressive – if wholly and utterly bonkers – is a feature called Magic Story Maker which creates AI-generated bedtime stories. All that for just $149. **byloftie.com**

ROCK AND ROLI

Compact squishy-keyed controller wows

Roli have unveiled the next product in their super-duper line of Seaboard MPE (MIDI Polyphonic Expression) controllers – the Seaboard Block M. Building on the vaunted Seaboard RISE 2 keyboard, the more compact Block M boasts 24 "keywaves" with "5D touch technology", allowing players to operate across the axes of strike, glide, slide, pressure and lift, pushing keyboard-based playing into entirely new territories of musical expression. The Roli Studio production suite that's included in the package offers a world of control modes, effects and more, while the Roli Dashboard software promises visual behaviour displays and intuitive parameter adjustment. Whew! That is a solid bang-to-buck ratio at £300. **roli.com**

HEAD SCRATCHER

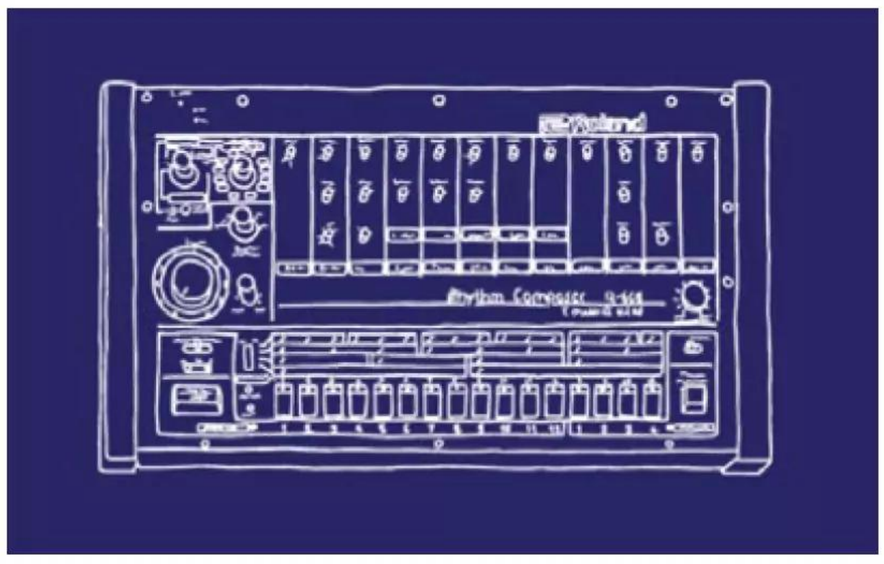
Porcelain 'Star Wars' helmet? Go on then

This is Discommon Goods' Porcelain Helmet No 1. It's a life-size helmet the design of which sits somewhere between a Mandalorian and Iron Man's helmet, and it's made entirely of (you've guessed it) porcelain. Seriously. Adorned in blue and white glaze, it looks like one of those plates your gran kept hidden in her glass cabinet that no-one was ever allowed to use, and if you do choose to put it on your noggin, you will literally have to smash it off. Yours for £750. **discommongoods.com**

SURVEY THE ZINE

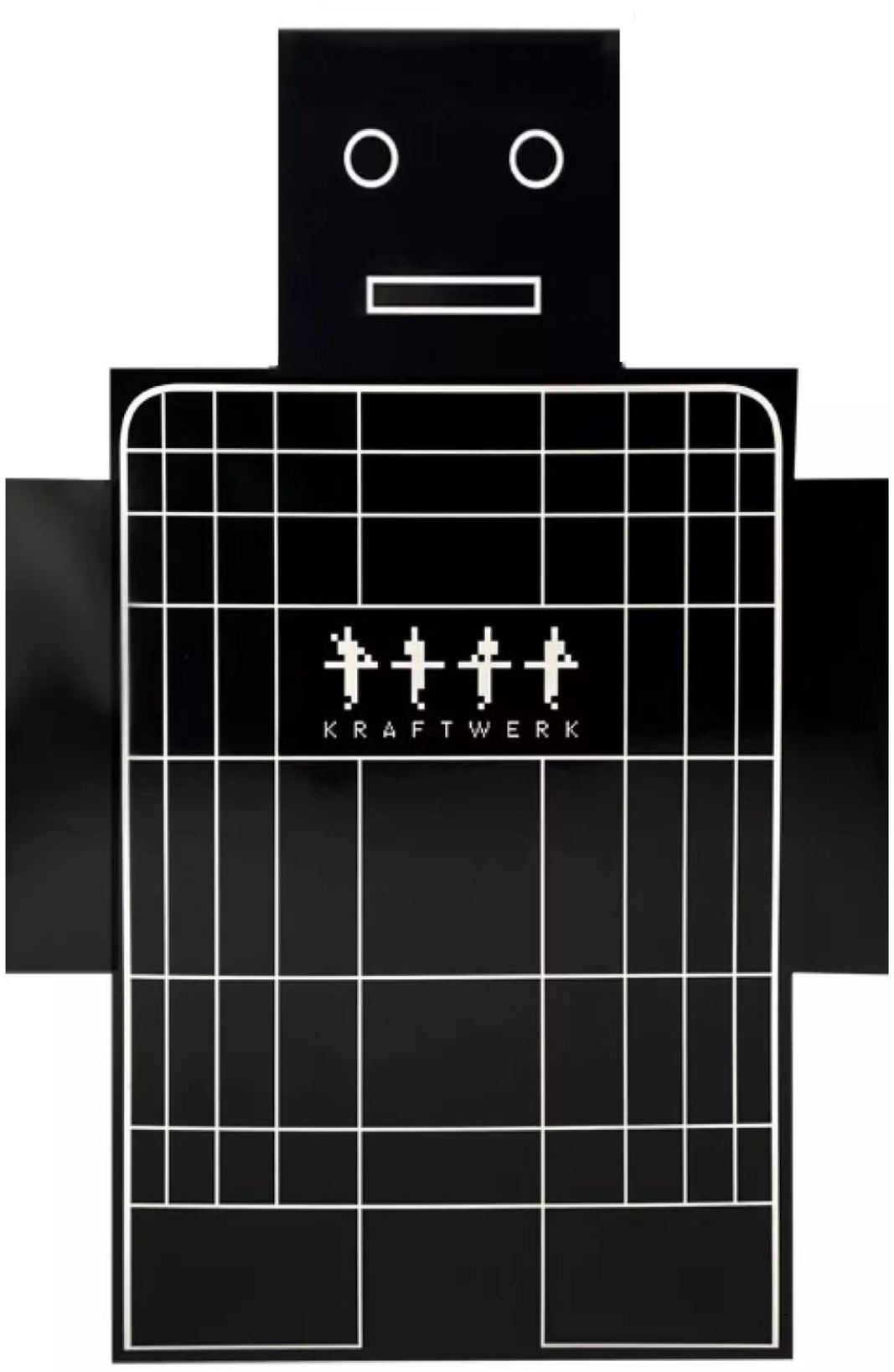
Hand-drawn synth obsessions continued

Following Cassette Electrik member Oli Freke's 2021 book – 'Synthesizer Evolution: From Analogue To Digital (And Back)' – comes an A6 zine series of the same name. A pocket-sized ode to the development of electronic instruments replete with Freke's signature hand-drawn illustrations, it kicks off with Vintage Synths, chronicling the influence of the Minimoog, the ARP 2600 and other iconic machines. The subsequent 'Drum Machines And Samplers' zine goes on to explore 46 talismanic models, from the TR-808 to the Fairlight CMI, with other examples dating back to the mid-20th century. Well worth earmarking at just £4 a copy. **velocitypress.uk**



BAG AT IT

The Robots release exclusive bot-themed backpack

Ever feel blue about Kraftwerk's rate of release these days? Then you clearly haven't been paying attention to their work in the merch department, with this €250 robot bag available exclusively from the group's official website. Arriving adorned with light-reflective lines surrounding the group's logo, and featuring an inner pouch that can hold up to 13-inch laptops, it also comes in a special box designed and signed by the big man himself, Ralf Hütter. Get cracking, though. These won't hang about. **klingklangkonsumprodukt.com**

SIMPLE PLEASURES

Glasgow's finest hit the big screen

The rise and fall (and rise again) of Simple Minds is a story for the ages, so it will come as little surprise that someone's made a 75-minute film about them. Directed by Joss Crowley, 'Everything Is Possible' is currently screening on Paramount Plus. It follows Scotland's most successful band from the Glasgow high-rises that Jim Kerr and Charlie Burchill grew up in, to the more salubrious Sicily, where the two now reside as neighbours. Their bromance is central to the story, beginning with a shared love of Eurocentric Kraftwerk and Moroder-influenced records, while A-list interviewees include Molly Ringwald, Bob Geldof, Jimmy Iovine and Jerry Dammers. **paramount.com**

PULSE

VISCOUNT

London's electropop goth? We're all ears

WHO?

Dreamy, brooding and mysterious, Viscount truly exists in a dimension all of her own. On '10 Past 10', her most recent cassette album, listeners are invited inside the walls of an imagined gothic castle to hear an otherworldly story of its occupants. Back in this dimension, we know Viscount as London multi-disciplinary artist Lucy Anstey, who conjures up her own dark mixture of moody electropop.

WHY VISCOUNT?

According to Anstey, '10 Past 10' is "a soundtrack to broken nightmares and cursed sweet dreams". Across its eight tracks, she tells tales of her fictional world with haunting clicks and eerie whistle tones littering 'Dungeon', while 'Ipso Facto' brings 1980s strings and pop sensibilities to the fore. And how about that growling guitar on 'DFC (Dance Floor Code)', backed by the thump-thump of a drum machine? It's a contrast to the experimental soundscape that is 'Third Floor Corridor', with its discordant trills and bleeps going hand-in-hand with psychedelic electronics. A real feast for the ears, this.

TELL US MORE...

Inspired by the likes of Laurie Anderson, Sparks, Jim Henson, 'The Rocky Horror Picture Show', and even 90s game show 'The Crystal Maze', Anstey explains how these days she's guided most by narratives and characters. "Musically, I am trying to respond to a mood or story in whatever way I can," she says. "I record sounds on my phone if I hear something strange, and then try to replicate the mood using different instruments." But it's not just music-making that Anstey has an appetite for. By day, she's a prop maker and has recently been working on a new ride for Disneyland Paris, of all places. "This sounds fake, but for the last few months I've been making a castle!" she laughs. Better yet, Anstey is also writing and collecting material for a second Viscount record. If it's as good as '10 Past 10', then we're in for a treat.

FINLAY MILLIGAN

'10 Past 10' is out now via Bandcamp

UNDER THE INFLUENCE

With the release of his debut solo album, 'Outta Sync', musician, DJ and filmmaker **Don Letts** shines a light on what made him who he is

INTERVIEW: JEREMY ALLEN
PICTURE: JOHN BEHETS

NO END OF LOW END

"I heard bass, coming through the music of Jamaica, without understanding why it spoke to me at first. Because bass is the island's gift to the world, isn't it? Not that they invented it, but they pushed it centre stage and made it a lead thing. We'll give Jamaica that prop. The first dub I heard was from 1970, a Lee Perry And The Upsetters B-side called 'Tackio' [aka 'Tackro', the B-side to 'Yakety Yak'], and this thing was so out of step with everything that was going on. We're talking about dub before the word was even used!

"And I remember being struck by the sonics, the bass… the space. Then the next thing that connected all of this was 'King Tubbys Meets Rockers Uptown'. Between that and Keith Hudson's 'Pick A Dub', they forged in me this innate love of bass and dub culture that has stayed from that time to this. And I guess the whole thing was encapsulated within sound system culture."

TROJAN RECORDS

"People don't understand, it wasn't Don Letts who started 'Punky Reggae Party', it was Trojan Records. That label and the pirate radio stations meant everything to me growing up as a kid. Trojan launched in 1968, the same year that Enoch Powell made his 'Rivers Of Blood' speech. So while his poisonous politics were fucking with the old people, Trojan came up with the antidote.

"It was music that really captured the imagination of my white mates. It was their money that took those records into the charts. Make no mistake, Trojan really sealed this country's love affair with Jamaican music long before I did that Roxy shit. You know, John Lydon, Joe Strummer, Paul Simonon – they would have all been hip to fucking Trojan, man."

THAT'S HOW I ROLL...

"The film that inspired me to become a filmmaker was 'The Harder They Come'. To put it in context, it's the early 70s, I'm this Black British thing that's kind of a confusing concept, because it was a weird social experiment that had never existed before. We're trying to work out where we fit in. You're looking to America, there's civil rights, the Black Panthers thing, but we weren't American. You're looking to Jamaica – parents are from Jamaica – to try to work out what your identity is. And part of that journey was seeing this film starring Jimmy Cliff. And it remains Jamaica's most famous and best film.

"It was there that I was captivated and taken by the power of cinema to inform, inspire and entertain. I left the cinema thinking, 'Hmm, I wouldn't mind being a filmmaker', which was a ridiculous idea for a young black man in the early 70s, trust me. Fast forward five years – punk rock explodes. My white mates are picking up guitars and getting their shit together. 'Oh fuck. I want to pick up something.' So I pick up a Super 8 camera, start filming the bands and end up doing a thing called 'The Punk Rock Movie'.

"I've made about 350 music videos, a shitload of documentaries, including ones on Gil Scott-Heron, Sun Ra and George Clinton, and a couple of feature

films, the first of which – called 'Dancehall Queen' – was a direct homage to 'The Harder They Come'. If you ask any young person in Jamaica or from the Jamaican diaspora about the most famous film from Jamaica, they're gonna say 'Dancehall Queen', and that is my proudest achievement to this day. Don't ask an older person, they'll say 'The Harder They Come'. But 'Dancehall Queen' is a cult phenomenon and that meant a lot to this Black British kid who was trying to find his way."

THE BEATLES

"My love of pop comes from The Beatles, without a doubt. I was fucking Beatles crazy. At one point in my life, I owned the second largest collection of Beatles memorabilia in this country, until punk came along and I got rid of the whole lot. I used to be an Apple scrub. I'd sit outside their offices in vain waiting to see them come or go.

"Years later, I did get Paul to appear for a cameo in my Bob Marley video for 'One Love'. And four years ago – and I don't know how I popped up on his radar – he asked me to make a documentary for him called 'Something New'. And that was a buzz – to sit down with a brother like this, interviewing this dude for two hours. Inside I was crying because it reminded me of the capacity of music to empower; to be sitting down and interviewing one of my heroes. Even now – I don't want to go on about The Beatles – but fuck, what a body of work!"

SHAPING UP

"Somebody made a film about me recently called 'Rebel Dread', and I had my book out too called 'There And Black Again'. I'm not bragging about my output, but it put me in this position where I'd go and do a lot of promotion – lots of Q&As and all this stuff. It's been like a therapist's couch, and it's kind of an interesting dynamic, because it makes you check your shit. And one of the questions that kept coming up was, 'Where do you get your confidence from?'. That's something I really thought about, and I realised, society made me that way.

"Growing up in the 60s and 70s, I was made to feel like shit. There was the obvious racism, but it was more pervasive than that. At school they'd show me pictures of a white Jesus Christ. That's perfection – I have a fucking standard – you know what I mean? So the reason that I was gonna get my shit together and get tooled up, ideas-wise, was to prove the opposite.

"Growing up they're saying, 'Don, you can have equal opportunities', they're not teaching you about slavery, and you should apparently feel fucking grateful to be here. Without that, I might not be Don Letts, I might be this passive individual. So thank you England for treating me like shit when I was a kid because you made me the animal I am today."

'Outta Sync' is out now on Cooking Vinyl. 'There And Black Again: The Autobiography Of Don Letts' is published by Omnibus

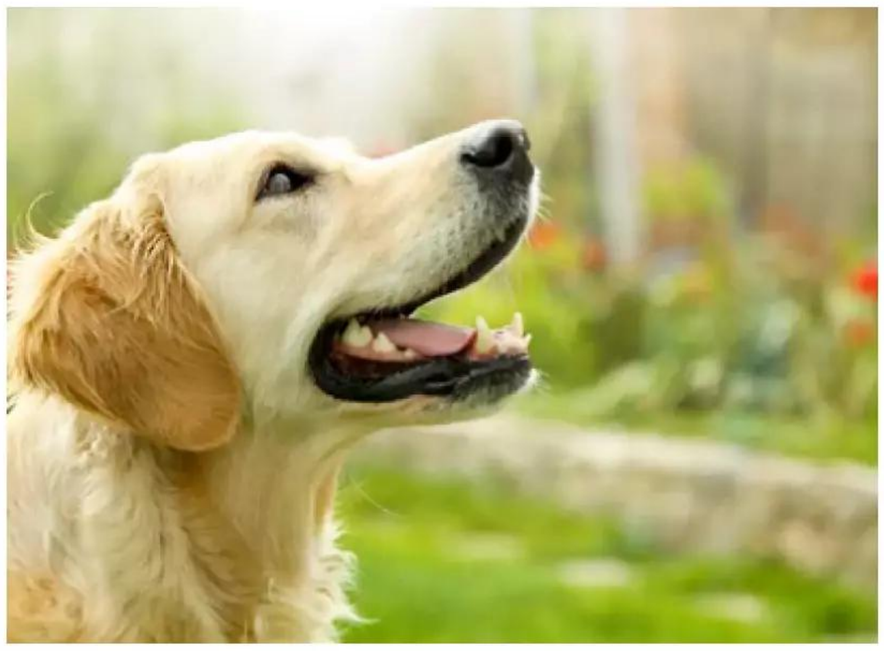
DESK JOCKEY

Music player has table manners

Ruark call their new R810 Radiogram a “music instrument for music lovers”, but they don’t mean the kind of instrument you’re probably imagining. This is a high-fidelity music *playing* device, and a statement piece at that, made from sustainable walnut. With Bluetooth, Wi-Fi and a host of streaming capabilities, you can even use it as a mount for your telly to transform your living room set-up into an all-in-one smart system. The downside is that it will set you back £3,000, but an audiovisual Swiss Army knife of this calibre won’t leave you disappointed. **ruarkaudio.com**

BANGING ON

More random musings from **Fat Roland**. On his mind this month (as far as we can tell) is **French Music**



Bonjour. Je m'appelle Fat Roland, which en français est Rolande Le Grand. Je suis un writer pour Sound D'Electronique. I write beaucoup brilliant words dans le subject of techno, musique concrète, très cool synthétiseur sound, and many other claquer noises that go boom-boom-boom.

Dans 2024, musique Française is going to be the next grande thing. Thomas Bangalter, which in French is Thomas Bangalter, will reformez Daft Punk. Suddenly, everyone will be wearing helmets. Wait. What's the French for helmet? Suddenly, everyone will be wearing uber-berets au les tête. Laurent Garnier will get a Numbero Une dans le disco pop charts, and Jean-Michel Jarre will write songs about all the other elements such as hydrogène, nitrogène and, um, dodecahedrène, or something. Jeez, Fats. French *and* science in the same column? Have you lost your mind?

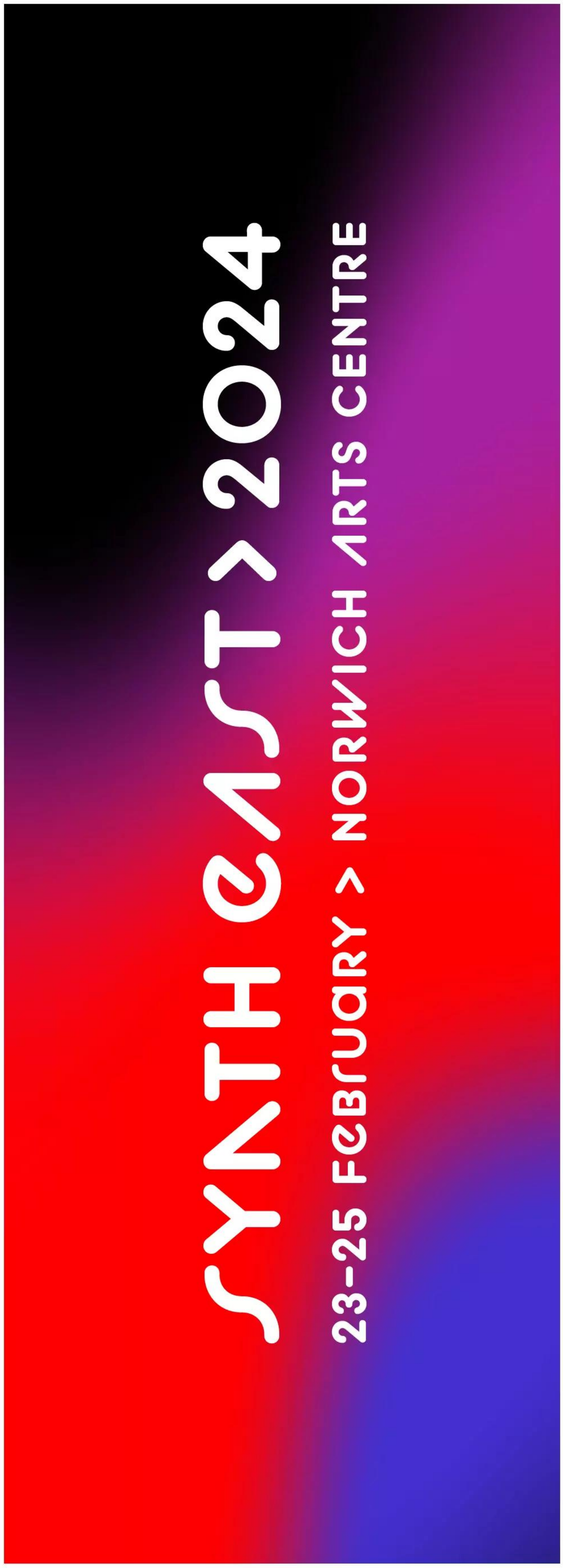
Le Angleterre folks ne pas like the French. Ever since Nelson kicked le bottom de Napoleon at le Battle De Trafalgez, les English have thought they were the best at everything. In 1994, they built a tunnel across the Channel so they could pop their heads through and say "yah boo sucks" to the French.

And yet, the French are better at everything. They've got 'Boléro', we've got 'Sussudio'. They have discothèques, we have karaoke nights down at the Red Lion. They have Flat Eric, we have Sooty. Actually, we Brits win that last one. Sooty could easily beat Flat Eric in a fight. That wand is lethal. Straight in the eye. Ouch! What's French for "ouch"? Ouchez-vous!

There's a reason why Kraftwerk went on a 'Tour De France' rather than bombing it up the M6 on a Segway. Chicago house legend Lil Louis chose a 'French Kiss' instead of a sloppy snog outside Luton Town Hall. Adam And The Ants sang 'Young Parisians' not 'Yobbo Mancs Throwing Up In Wetherspoons'.

I'm often mistaken for Serge Gainsbourg because of the way I twiddle my organ. His most famous hit 'Je T'Aime... Moi Non Plus' translates as 'I Like You… But I Can't Do Maths'. He once wrote a brilliant tribute to Bonnie and Clyde. (Why he'd write a song about 'Blue Peter' dogs, I have no idea.) Gainsbourg was always seen smoking Gitanes cigarettes. Five packs a day. This made him super-cool, which is ridiculous. I eat 14 Greggs pasties every lunchtime. Is that cool? No, it makes me smell of onions and meat. As people always say to me, "Je t'aime... moi tu has une odeur répugnante of crusty steak bake".

Au revoir, which is French for "thanks for reading – see you again next month". I'm brilliant at this. Brilliantez. Le brilliantez où est le supermarché à l'hôtel. Bonjour. Honestly, I'm a natural.



TIME MACHINE

In January 1984, German experimental noise pioneers **Einstürzende Neubauten** performed the Concerto For Voice And Machinery in all its spontaneous glory at the ICA in London. Art? Or demolition?

WORDS: DAVE SIMPSON

The Concerto For Voice And Machinery was held at London's prestigious ICA (Institute Of Contemporary Arts) on 3 January 1984. That night, Einstürzende Neubauten were joined onstage by Genesis P-Orridge of Throbbing Gristle and Frank "Fad Gadget" Tovey. Most memorably, however, the venue itself became part of the performance.

During the event, various power tools were employed to drill into the walls and floor, a circular saw was used to destroy a metal railing and bricks were thrown into a cement mixer. Before long, the stage had become engulfed in wood chips, flying sparks and clouds of dust, while the room filled with acrid smoke and the smell of burning. The show finally stopped after 25 minutes, with panicked ICA staff barking instructions and requests into walkie-talkies. It was at this point that ticket holders who'd paid £12 to get in proceeded to start a riot and try to destroy the stage.

As the band's Alexander Hacke told me in 2007 – just before the artist Jo Mitchell recreated the infamous event at the same venue – Einstürzende Neubauten had been banned from various venues already, after mounting similar assaults on their surroundings. They were barred (and as far as I know, still are) from The Warehouse in Leeds after a show on 18 August 1983 saw them taking power drills to the rear wall. However, the Concerto For Voice And Machinery was on a different level entirely.

"We had this utopian idea of leaving the stage from underneath," Hacke explained. "The plan was to dig through the stage into the tunnel system underneath the venue, which is supposed to go all the way to Buckingham Palace. Obviously, the venue had no idea of our intentions."

Hacke recalled Concerto For Voice And Machinery being the culmination of the band's mission to create sounds that had "no connection to rock music", and the ICA billing it as a "highbrow art thing".

After forming in West Berlin in 1980, Einstürzende Neubauten had moved quickly from more conventional electronics to using custom-built instruments, often made out of scrap metal and building tools. This led the British music press to dub them, along with kindred spirits such as the British band Test Department, as "metal bashers". By 1984, anything they could lay their hands on might become part of the performance. At that time, the venue – whose management may not have been aware of the earlier controversies – had no idea what the band were planning.

"I think the ICA probably started to realise something was afoot when a cement mixer was set up onstage alongside electric drills and jackhammers," Hacke recalled. "There was a piano too, but that would be smashed to pieces. In those days, we'd often take the stage under the influence of substances or alcohol. But this time, I think we were particularly aware of the potential for danger so we were pretty much straight. When we went onstage, the euphoria was so intense. It felt ritualistic, meditative, like we were Samurai."

To this day, there's controversy over who performed that night. Marc Almond's supposed appearance seems to be an urban myth. Hacke confirmed

that despite differing versions, Blixa Bargeld (the band's singer and founder member of Nick Cave And The Bad Seeds) did perform, but only towards the end, singing a solitary word, "Sehnsucht", which means "addicted to desire".

Frank Tovey sang what he described as "Om-like mantras", and Hacke couldn't remember whether Genesis P-Orridge was handling a chainsaw or a pneumatic drill, but did recall the whole room being filled with smoke and the stench of petrol everywhere.

"It sounded like a cross between a building site and war," he claimed.

Because he was still a teenager at the time, the other members wouldn't let him near the heavier machinery.

"I stood, wearing protective gloves and a visor, throwing milk bottles into the cement mixer, which smashed and flew into the crowd."

Scant health and safety back in those days.

"But we would have kept it pretty straightforward if we weren't inspired by the reaction of the audience. There's a famous Walter Benjamin essay about the destructive character, and he says, 'The destructive character knows only one watchword – make room. And only one activity – clearing away'. And that's how it was. We were thinking, 'Actually, it's not us doing anything. The audience are tearing the place apart!'. People were fighting over the drills and sledgehammers. Cables and machinery were pulled into the audience."

Hacke claimed to have realised something long after the event, though.

"The thing about these situations is that no matter how wild it gets, people do instinctively take care of each other. I'm sure there were moments when we thought it was getting out of hand, but it was all so quick. It went 'snap', like a switch being flicked and everyone going berserk."

Once Hacke had run out of milk bottles, he left the stage and wandered into the crowd.

"Heated discussions were going on between officials at the entrance," he said of what he witnessed. "They couldn't really throw themselves into the fray. It was hopeless. After 21 minutes they pulled the power. It was the only thing they could do. But the audience just carried on banging things."

By the end, there was a big hole in the stage, but to Hacke's eternal regret Neubauten's drilling didn't make it through to the actual stone structure of the building.

"So we failed."

Still, the concert has become a legendary piece of history and is still talked about online, where someone who was there on the night remembers being "hit by a piece of concrete", and another claims to have heard it called "the best gig since the crucifixion".

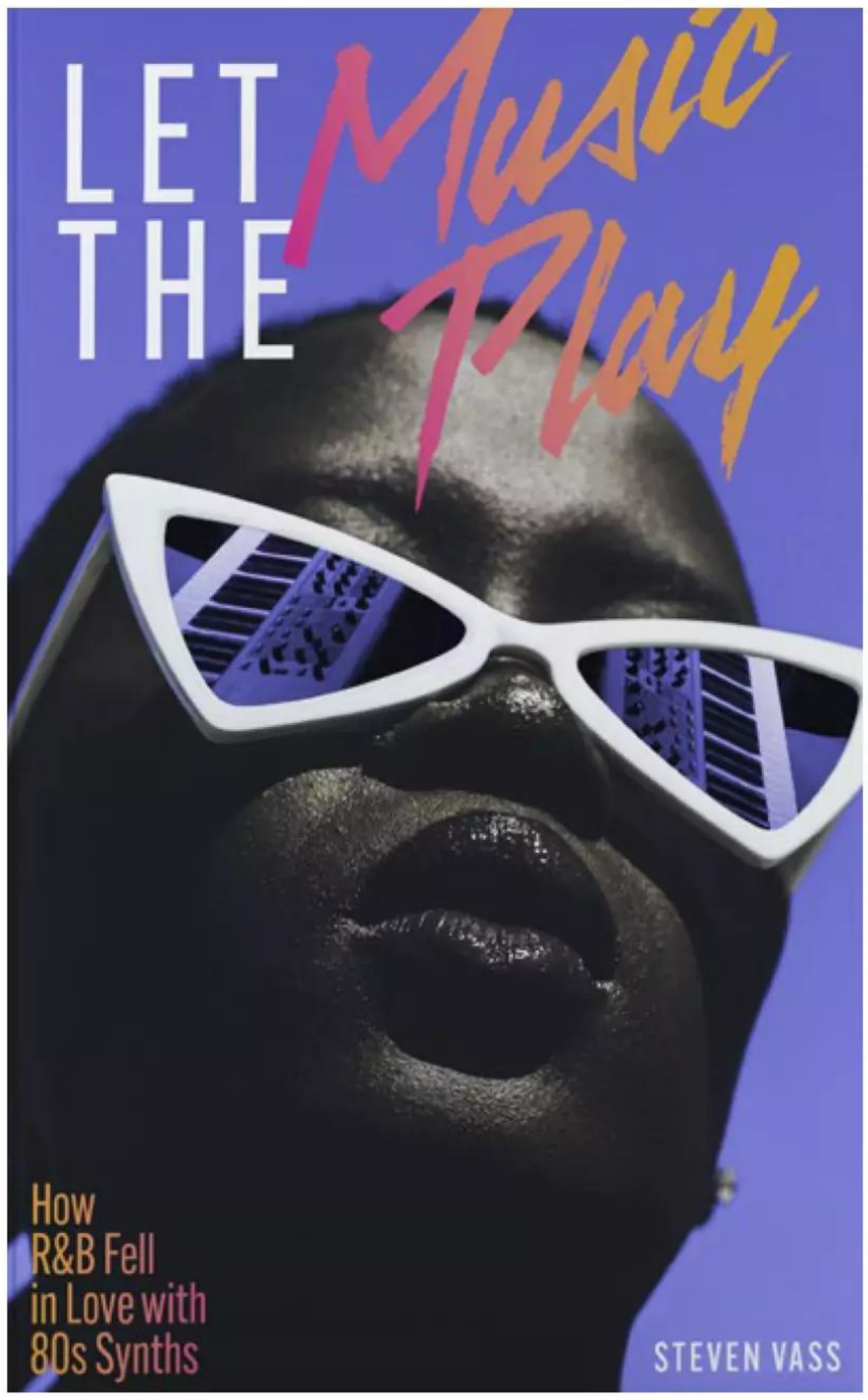
Back in 2007, Hacke had high hopes for the recreation ahead of the performance of the Concerto For Voice And Machinery II.

"I hope this time they actually make it down the tunnels and pop in to see the Queen."

SHINE A LIGHT

Book tells love story of R&B and electronics

1980s synthpop wasn't all about The Human League and New Order, yet many marginalised artists have seen their important electronic contributions skipped in the history books. Steven Vass' new tome – 'Let The Music Play: How R&B Fell In Love With 80s Synths' – aims to right that wrong by chronicling how new music tech reinvented the genre in the years between 1978 and 1986. The terrific tale unravels the careers of Hall of Fame artists such as Prince, Sade and Janet Jackson, as well as often forgotten characters like Skyy, Princess and Zapp. Essential reading, get it on preorder now for £11.99 ahead of publication next month. **velocitypress.uk**



THE BIG BANG

Company wants to make space sex safe

Getting down and dirty in space is a thorny issue – think gravity, radiation, aliens – but if this species is going to expand towards the stars, as some believe we should, then it's a necessity. Cue Dutch entrepreneur Egbert Edelbroek, who has set up "space sex research facility" SpaceBorn United to coordinate it. With Edelbroek confident this will happen in his lifetime, they are launching operations with mice at the end of the year, using a disk to mix sperm and egg cells in space, then freezing that embryo to protect it during, um, "re-entry". They hope to achieve the same with a human embryo in roughly five or six years, so… to infinity, and beyond. **spacebornunited.com**

CLEAR AS DAYLIGHT

Transparent turntable brings the class

Remember that period in the 2000s when it seemed like every new device came in a limited edition see-through case, allowing you to glimpse all the delicious wiring and circuitry? Well, while Transparent's new turntable isn't *quite* that, it sure is close. The main body of this deck is completely transparent – made from aluminium and tempered glass – and comes with a cartridge from those specialists at Ortofon. Another big draw is that it's Bluetooth-compatible and completely modular, making it future-proof through repairs and upgrades, which is part of Transparent's circular design philosophy to help reduce waste. So while the turntable will set you back a cool £1,100, it will both last and look great in your living room. **transpa.rent**

GRAM DUNK

Modern multi-FX console channels retro vibes

The latest offering from Knoxville's Hologram Electronics is the formidable Chroma Console, a multi-effects pedal inspired by "the eccentricity, grit, and lively instability of beloved vintage recording technology". As if you weren't already sold, the pedal's smart interface is a thing of beauty. Split into four sections, including character and texture, each provides a menu of respective effects with a simple set of controls above to shape their behaviours. These can be ordered in any way you choose to bring out a vast array of sonic signatures. It can also record knob movements and create loops in pure aleatory heaven. With shipping scheduled for this month, best withdraw that $399. **hologramelectronics.com**

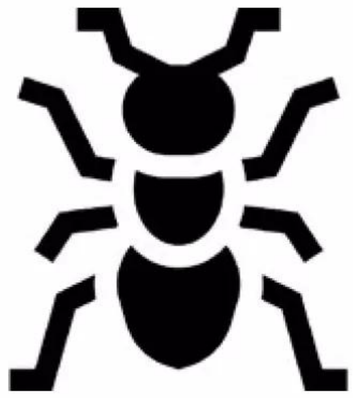
ELECTRONIC SOUND
+ MOLTEN MODULAR PRESENT

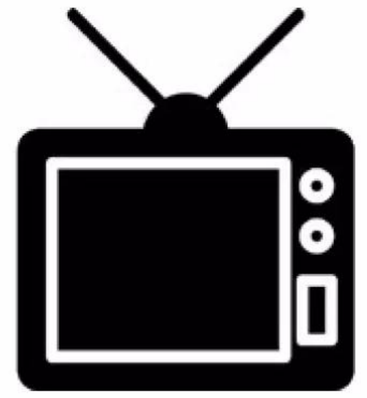
SYNTH EAST › 2024

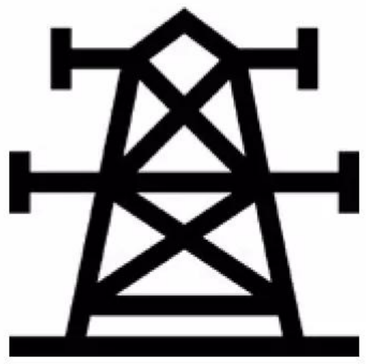
SYNTH EXPO
MORTON SUBOTNICK UK FILM PREMIERE
BLANCMANGE
ADAM BUXTON
ULTRAMARINE
STEVE DAVIS
LUKE SANGER
ALL-STAR MODULAR PATCH OFF
EURORACK DIY WORKSHOPS

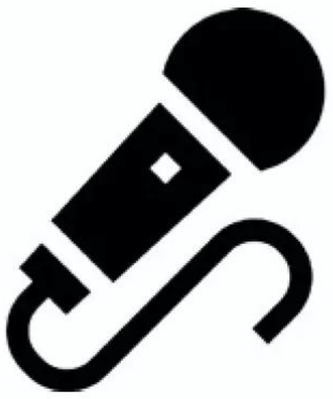
23-25 FEBRUARY
NORWICH ARTS CENTRE

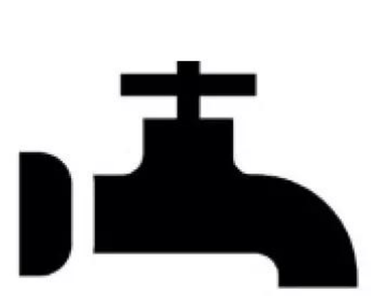
SYNTHEAST.COM

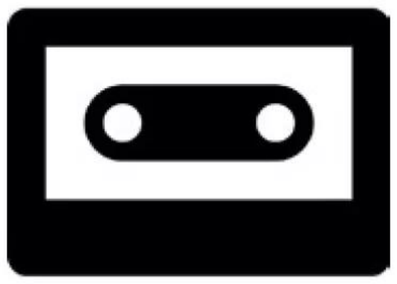


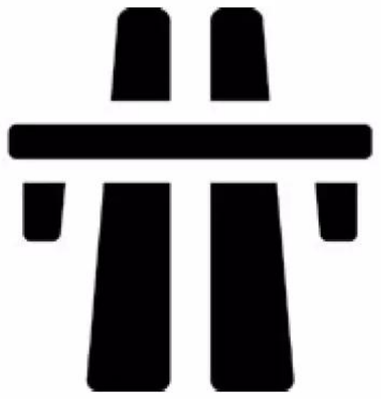


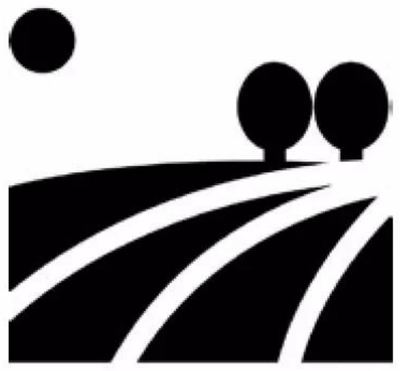


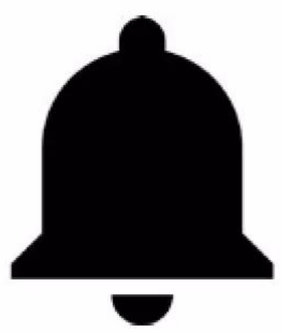


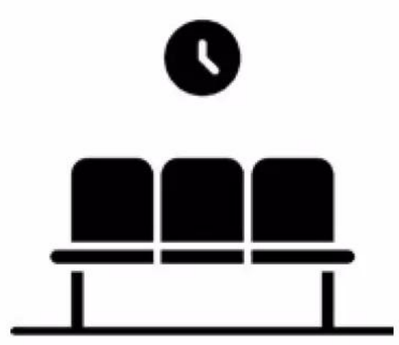












Ambient: An Introduction

From Debussy to Brian Eno, The Orb to Burial, the foundations of ambient are rooted in esoteric, unconventional and often surprising forms and sounds

Words: David Stubbs

In 2023, "ambient" music is ubiquitous and generated in vast quantities, adding to the diffuseness of the contemporary soundscape. And there is a sense that it's as old as music itself, taking ancient forms in horns and wind chimes. As a purposeful genre, however, it's just over 100 years old. Ambient can denote the bland, the New Age – like aural Radox. However, at best, it can provide not just a profound feeling of balm but also deep consternation. It can soothe – it can also subvert.

Though it's argued that ambient originally insinuated itself on the world when the French composer Claude Debussy first heard gamelan at the Paris Exposition of 1889, it was actually Erik Satie who initially spoke about creating "furniture music", designed to take its place in the background rather than the foreground, an object of undivided attentiveness.

Satie was a deeply eccentric figure, who for years dressed in identical sets of corduroy suits, and wrote an absurdist book titled 'Memoirs Of An Amnesiac'. His most famous compositions, such as the 'Gymnopédies', are so limpidly familiar they can be found on modern-day compilations like 'Chill With Satie'. Yet he was also involved with the Dadaists and composed pieces for the stage which incorporated the sounds of propellers.

Satie created a series of pieces including the innocuous and looping 'Carrelage Phonique', meant to be played "during lunches". He wrote of softening the noises of the knives and forks at dinner, not dominating them, not imposing itself. It would fill up those awkward, heavy silences that sometimes fall between friends who are dining together, and would "spare them the trouble of paying attention to their own banal remarks". In that last comment is contained the fiendish irony of Satie, the barb beneath the studiously bourgeois exterior.

In 1934, however, one General George Squier took Satie at his word, creating the Muzak company, suppliers of background music to be played in elevators, offices, or latterly, on the phone to call centres. Muzak is designed to offer aural comfort but in its teeth-itching blandness, more often irritates. It is ambient's dumb twin.

The late 1940s saw the arrival of both musique concrète and the possibility of field recordings on magnetic tape in which Pierre Schaeffer, and later Luc Ferrari, entirely reconfigured the relationship between music and the environment – now the natural world could become the very fabric of music itself.

Composers like Karlheinz Stockhausen used the methods of the new electronic music created in the sound labs of Cologne to create monumental, overarching pieces like 'Kontakte' which intimated the vastness of the cosmos – ambient on a universal scale. (In jazz, meanwhile, Sun Ra would use electronics in a similar way, in wild, ranging pieces like 'The Cosmic Explorer'.) On a rather more minimal scale, John Cage composed '4'33"', a piece not of "silence" but whose content consisted entirely of whatever ambient noise was occurring in or outside the concert hall – a statement about the impossibility of pure silence.

The 1960s and 70s would see a number of female pioneers using electronics in quietly radical new ways. The Radiophonic Workshop was ostensibly a functional sound effects unit, but from it arose Daphne Oram who created her Oramics system, and Delia Derbyshire, who in the early 1960s produced a series of "Hörspiel"-type pieces for radio with Barry Bermange, including 'There Is A God!'. These incorporated spoken-word elements set against swirling, mesmeric, amorphous and radiophonically generated backdrops of Derbyshire's own making.

Some of both Oram and Derbyshire's work would go uncredited in its time – notably Oram's part in the soundtrack to the horror film 'The Innocents' and Derbyshire's reworking of the theme to 'Doctor Who'. Other female pioneers, including Éliane Radigue, Pauline Oliveros and in the mid-70s, Suzanne Ciani, all created instrumental but meaningful electronic soundscapes.

Yet it was Brian Eno, who, like Satie, spoke the most consciously and methodically about creating a systems-based ambient music. Eno had many precedents – such as the 1960s minimalists Steve Reich and Terry Riley, whose works, though based on repetition, were far busier and faster-moving than Eno's ambient series. He would also release works on his own Obscure label by Michael Nyman ('Decay Music') and Gavin Bryars, whose 'The Sinking Of The Titanic' and 'Jesus' Blood Never Failed Me Yet' used slow-moving, cumulative repetition to deeply moving effect.

Eno was keenly aware of the West German experimental music set of the 1970s, who, in their search for a new, post-war cultural identity, created largely instrumental music that bypassed the over-familiar tropes of Anglo-American, blues-based rock in favour of sonic canvasses on which they could inscribe a new music that was West German in origin. Eno was also familiar with the work of Hans-Joachim Roedelius and Dieter Moebius, aka Cluster, whose music was drifting in a similar direction to his own, and who he would go on to work with.

Meanwhile, in his collaborations with Robert Fripp, including 1973's '(No Pussyfooting)', Eno had already explored and slowly expanded on the idea of "drone", as established by the likes of Glenn Branca.

The inspiration for Eno's 'Discreet Music' arose, according to his own account, from a visit by his friend Judy Nylon while he was in hospital recovering from a car accident. She brought him an album of harp music which he played with the volume turned down low, so that its plucking blended with the sound of the rain pattering against the ward windows. He became excited by the notion of music which didn't impose, but rather constituted "a landscape you could belong to".

Eno's subsequent ambient albums, including 'Music For Films', 'Ambient 1: Music For Airports' and 'Ambient 4: On Land', are pivotal, deathless masterpieces which, thanks to the kudos of his Roxy Music days and already bedazzling solo career, were greeted with great attentiveness by the music press rather than as bewildering conceits. They work not just because of their system and method but also because of Eno's own unerring ear for beauty.

'Music For Films' is a wonderful series of incidental pieces – unassuming, materialising and evaporating like watercolours dissolving on the page, yet leaving a deep impression at once vivid and oblique. They served a functional purpose too, featuring in Robert Hughes' 1980 TV arts series 'The Shock Of The New' and in many other programmes besides. 'Music For Airports' was also intended to be functional. However, when it was played as background music at an actual airport, travellers complained that its beatless, choral strains and looped phrases made them feel anxious, so it was shelved and replaced with conventional muzak.

There were some notable players in the post-punk era who also took up Eno's ideas to some degree – Gilbert & Lewis, formerly of Wire, Throbbing Gristle's Chris Carter and Cabaret Voltaire among them. Eno also had proteges of his own, such as the zither player Laraaji, whose 1980 album 'Ambient 3: Day Of Radiance' – a work of overwhelming, cascading brilliance – Eno produced. The previous year, Holger Czukay, formerly of Can, had released 'Movies', an ingenious weave of short wave radio extracts and film clips that prefigured sound assemblages decades down the line.

However, the progress of ambient stalled somewhat in the 1980s, as if in that politically and culturally fractious, tribal decade, in which the ravages of Thatcherism were met with a similarly aggressive response, there was no obvious place for it in the cultural mood music. Conversely, pop – in all its hues – seemed to blaze with a glossy, go-for-it energy that was in keeping with the new, dominant political spirit of the age.

At the turn of the 1990s, ambient revived hugely with the coming of acid house and rave, and the huge societal mood-shift the scene engendered. Ambient sounds were conducive to the post-rave "comedown", chiming in with a new, hazy vibe of mellowness and blissful chill-out as the impending "end of history" loomed large with the fall of the Berlin Wall, and a less combative, more peacable era beckoned.

Two ambient milestones from this period involved the hand of Jimmy Cauty. The KLF's 'Chill Out' (1990) was a lush, backward drift up the deep, dark river of pop's increasingly distant past, featuring samples of Elvis Presley, Fleetwood Mac, Can and Acker Bilk, bobbing semi-submerged in the lapping water – a veritable postmodern cruise, pure memory bliss, albeit shot through with a sort of unspoken, pensive melancholy.

There was also Alex Paterson's 'The Orb's Adventures Beyond The Ultraworld', which featured 'A Huge Ever Growing Pulsating Brain That Rules From The Centre Of The Ultraworld'. Co-written by Cauty, it featured numerous samples and soundalikes, including Minnie Riperton's 'Lovin' You' and a chord progression, floating onward and upward beatlessly into the cosmos, extracted from Grace Jones' 'Slave To The Rhythm', as well as an array of effects and film excerpts.

With the ambient house of The Orb, you sensed a rehabilitation – at long last – of the epic, inflated spirit of later Pink Floyd, pariahs in the punk/post-punk era (although minus their sense of self-importance). Dub too, the Jamaican-born offshoot of ambient featuring the studio as musical instrument, was placed front and centre in pop culture, creating a feeling that much of the music of the future would be a ghostly, celestial awning, a patchwork made up of pop's past.

Ambient grew and evolved in the 1990s, a relatively untroubled and prosperous political period (for many in the West, at least). Its textural lushness sat nicely in those more hedonistic but less urgent times. Artists such as Aphex Twin and The Future Sound Of London dipped in and out of the genre, juxtaposing their ambient works with other pieces of sheer techno ferocity. As his 'Selected Ambient Works 85-92' collection suggested, Richard James had been, to quote one of the characters sampled by The Orb, "waiting for music like this all my life".

The genre would proliferate and splinter. Ambient dub (in particular from Berlin duo Basic Channel). Ambient sound design. Ambient techno. As electronic music continued to develop and establish its ubiquity, groups like Autechre would come to treat music making as an exercise in mobile sound sculpture – not writing songs, but creating pieces. Key labels (Apollo, Warp),

networks and festivals sprang up. "Chill" became a watchword. There was a general blending and melding with world music, as Debussy had anticipated a century earlier and evidenced in Loop Guru's 'The Third Chamber' (1994).

Ambience entered post-rock music too, as it sought other places to free-range following the white wall that was My Bloody Valentine's 'To Here Knows When' (1991) – the final word perhaps in rock's evolution. Talk Talk continued their inexorable drift from would-be Duran popsters to the far left with 1988's 'Spirit Of Eden' then 'Laughing Stock' in 1991, demonstrating the revived, pervasive, oceanic influence of Miles Davis' electric jazz masterpieces 'In A Silent Way' and 'Bitches Brew'. And then there was Bark Psychosis, whose 21-minute, 1992 single 'Scum' ("It's all around you") posited ambient as an inescapable pollutant, the toxicity of modern life.

Bark Psychosis featured on the soundtrack to 'Jam', Chris Morris' turn of the millennium TV series in which he set comedy in unprecedented, warped realms, touching on horror against the spirit of dark ambient. This version of the genre, born out of post-industrial emissions from the likes of Throbbing Gristle and Zoviet France, billowed in relevance as the end of the century beckoned, reflecting what Tricky had termed "Pre-Millennium Tension" – the feeling that the frolicsome, hedonistic blue skies of the Britpop-dominated 90s were due somehow to blacken.

Bolstered by further developments in laptop technology, ambient took on greater – at times monumental – significance in the 21st century. William Basinski put together a body of ambient work in which decay is a critical factor. He is wont to take old tapes of sounds recorded decades earlier and rework them, highlighting rather than attempting to correct the stresses of age. This is most movingly illustrated on his 'The Disintegration Loops' series, four albums released across 2002 and 2003. The pieces result from his efforts to convert from magnetic tape to digital, only for the tapes to deteriorate in the process.

Basinski decided to make this deterioration the subject of the music, and these haunting, looped pieces represent a sort of defiance of the human spirit in the face of eventual destruction. He dedicated the albums to the victims of 9/11, which he witnessed. 'The Disintegration Loops' is in the spirit of fellow contemporaries like turntablist Philip Jeck, whose hypnotic music was assembled from discarded, unconsidered pieces of vinyl, or Gavin Bryars' 'The Sinking Of The Titanic', a piece of music that refuses to "die".

Boards Of Canada, two Scottish brothers – Mike Sandison and Marcus Eoin – who had grown up in Canada before relocating to the UK, created a body of work including 'Geogaddi' and 'Tomorrow's Harvest' that felt "hauntological", to borrow a phrase coined by philosopher Jacques Derrida, reworked by theorist Mark Fisher. The pieces harked back to the defining public information films of their childhood, their music deliberately distressed, hazy, analogue and wavering, suggesting lost futures still emitting a sort of radioactive half-life.

Think of Fennesz, who on 2004's 'Venice' sculpted huge, twisted sound designs from processed guitars, as if to signal that we were truly in a time where rock music was dead, fossilised matter – so much carbon. Or Deathprod (Helge Sten), whose self-titled 2004 album, a collection of his works since 1991 – grainy, remote, huge in scale – felt like a form of ambient unearthed in the year 3000 that had weathered over 1,000 years.

And then there's Burial (aka Will Bevan – or so we're led to believe), among the most self-effacing artists of all time, rarely photographed, never playing live, his very identity the source of much speculation. His textural, laptop-generated music, as presented on the self-titled 2006 debut album 'Burial' and its 2007 follow-up 'Untrue' is, in effect, a wordless lamentation for a rave era he had only experienced vicariously through his elder brother. Vividly geographical, as reflected in titles like 'South London Boroughs', his atmospheric pieces evoke the sodium-lit, dusky, melancholic toxicity of cities that had once burned bright with joy, but were now reduced to charcoal.

Having appeared to be caught in a rut, Burial has managed to cleverly develop his sound. His most recent EPs are like the aural equivalent of avant-garde visual art in their formalism and placement of elements, while the track 'Beachfires', looming like a storm, represents a harbinger of climate crisis.

Today, ambient music is of a piece with the sheer proliferation, the de-centredness of modern music, ranging from the distress of The Caretaker (Leyland Kirby), who has used ambient methods to convey the extreme mental anguish of dementia, to the profoundly blissful terrain mapped out by New Yorker David Tagg.

It can stimulate and assist in the condition of sleep (Max Richter, Paul Schütze, DJ Olive), or evoke higher states of consciousness. Bérangère Maximin, Stars Of The Lid, Tim Hecker, Susumu Yokota, Arve Henriksen, Pascal Savy, Hannah Peel, Mark Van Hoen, Colleen, Gail Priest – just a handful of the very many practitioners who have explored the infinite permutations allowed for in our technological but overcrowded, retromania-obsessed times in which it feels like space is the only place left to go.

Ambient: From A To Zzzzz

A curated snapshot rather than a definitive list, welcome to our alphabetical deep dive into the atmospheric and immersive world of ambient music. From key artists to strange concepts and beyond, prepare to see ambient in a whole new light

Words: Imogen Bebb, Bob Fischer, Claire Francis, Carl Griffin, Velimir Ilic, Isaak Lewis-Smith, Push, Fat Roland, Mark Roland, Mat Smith

A

A Strangely Isolated Place. Named after an Ulrich Schnauss album, this Los Angeles label and blog has built a distinctive community around it. As founder Ryan Griffin points out, "Everyone is inspired by their own strangely isolated place".

All Saints. Brian Eno founded his hugely respected label in 1992. Alongside work by Jon Hassell, Harold Budd, Roedelius, Laraaji, Roger Eno and Marconi Union, All Saints have issued landmark albums like Eno's 'Neroli' and Biosphere's 'Substrata'. The latest release is Chuck Johnson's lovely 'Shadows On The Green'.

'The Ambient Century'. Via Stockhausen, Terry Riley, John Cage, Kraftwerk, Brian Eno, minimalism and techno, Mark Prendergast's comprehensive 2003 book looks at the foundations and "no rules" development of ambient sound, which he describes as the most important breakthrough in music in 100 years.

Ambient Church. Ambient Church have hosted events in religious buildings in New York and Los Angeles since 2016, filling massive spaces with sounds and visuals for unique collective experiences. Their latest happenings featured Suzanne Ciani and Robert Rich.

Ambient Dub. Dubby delights written by robots. The protagonists included Higher Intelligence Agency, A Positive Life, Banco De Gaia and Suns Of Arqa. Dive into the 'Ambient Dub' compilations released by Beyond Records between 1992 and 1995 for more.

Ambient House. A biggie. You can ignore most of the rest of this list. The Orb and their Arizona weather forecasts. 808 State and their Pacific vibes. The KLF and their sheep. The irresistible force of, er, The Irresistible Force. House music without its handbags.

Ambient Kyoto. A festival of ambient music held in the city often described as Japan's cultural capital. The line-ups have featured a host of heavyweights, including Ryuichi Sakamoto, Terry Riley and Cornelius, alongside stunning multisensory installations.

Ambient Techno. Throw a rock at Warp's 'Artificial Intelligence' series and you'll strike an ambient technoist on the bonce. Richie Hawtin and Autechre. Ouch! B12 and Speedy J. Blam! And not forgetting non-Warpers like Carl Craig and Ultramarine, or newer producers like Skee Mask and Daniel Avery. Right on the noggin!

André 3000. The Outkast star has just released 'New Blue Sun', his first solo album, and it's a surprisingly immersive work of innovative flute ambience. Rap fans will fume, but a ton of TikTok kids are about to discover experimental music for the first time.

Ann Annie. Eli Goldberg, the multi-instrumentalist from Portland, Oregon, records dreamlike keyboard compositions as Ann Annie. The two volumes of 'Atmospheres' (released on Modularfield in 2017 and 2018) are particularly recommended, both levitating with deep, organic and spiritual new age warmth.

Aphex Twin. With typical oblivious confidence, Richard D James reshaped ambient music with 'Selected Ambient Works 85-92' (Apollo, 1992), a collection of gorgeous lo-fi cassette recordings, throwing the genre wide open for synthesists, beatmongers and crackpots of the day. See James' debut Polygon Window album, 'Surfing On Sine Waves' (Warp, 1993) too.

Apollo. Founded in 1992, Apollo is an offshoot of the Belgian techno imprint R&S. With key early releases including Aphex's first volume of 'Selected Ambient Works' and Biosphere's 'Patashnik', the label was a major contributor to the definition of ambient music in the 1990s.

Appendix.files. The amorphous music released by this cult Berlin label resides at the edge of ambient experimentation, voyaging at the fringes of "what is sonically understood as music, while metamorphosing the conceptions of the genre itself".

Ashra. Ashra's influential 1976 album 'New Age Of Earth' is a bona fide ambient classic. A star-bound, floating minimalist beauty, it was essentially a solo release from Ash Ra Tempel founder Manuel Göttsching following the dissolution of his renowned krautrock outfit.

Virginia Astley. Once a member of the short-lived but ultra-hip Ravishing Beauties, Astley combined piano, woodwind and field recordings for her luxuriantly summery 1984 debut solo album 'From Gardens Where We Feel Secure'. Collaborations with Sakamoto and David Sylvian followed, but she has long remained a charmingly elusive engima.

B

Julianna Barwick. US electronic loop exponent. Barwick's 2011 debut album, 'The Magic Place', fuses ambient experimentalism with a new age innocence that continues to set her apart. Her most recent long-player is 'Healing Is A Miracle' on Ninja Tune.

Basic Channel. Both an artist and a label, Berlin techno stalwart Moritz Von Oswald founded Basic Channel with Mark Ernestus 30 years ago. Highly minimal in sound and presentation, the duo atomise the structures of techno into dubby, often serene rhythmic pulses.

William Basinski. The classically trained Basinski is perhaps best-known for 'The Disintegration Loops I-IV'. The beautiful, mournful, suite of pieces for which he harnessed the gradual corruption of his elderly tape loops became a requiem for the attacks of 9/11, the day he completed the work in New York. It's a masterpiece.

Janet Beat. It's more than six decades since the Scottish avant-garde composer bought a Brenell tape machine, built her own oscilloscope and began creating experimental loops. Beat has added Moogs, DX-7s and gamelan rhythms to her arsenal over the years, but is only now enjoying the recognition she deserves.

David Behrman. Fusing pastoral woodwind with modular synth effects, American electroacoustic composer Behrman's two-track album 'On The Other Ocean' stands as a minimalist cipher for how man and machine can harmonise. It was released on Lovely Music in 1978, when very few people were worried about the nefarious advance of technology.

The Big Chill. Initially an immersive audiovisual club night with an ambient music soundtrack, The Big Chill was established by Pete Lawrence and Katrina Larkin in 1994 at the Union Chapel in London. The concept expanded from its chill-out roots to become a major multi-genre festival.

Biosphere. Norwegian musician Geir Jenssen has released in the region of 20 studio albums as Biosphere, including the fabulously icy 'Substrata' from 1997. He's a serial collaborator too, partnering with everyone from Pete Namlook to Higher Intelligence Agency to Deathprod.

Sofie Birch. Purveyor of "soft ambient", Danish sound artist Birch's work has lately moved into slightly more strident and attention-grabbing territory with the EP 'Our Circadian', a collaboration with Grand River. Her sustained ambient touch is unmistakable, especially on '3AM'.

Bird Song. Mother Nature's ambient soundtrack and a lasting inspiration for poets, playwrights and musicians. For deep listening, seek out 'A Tapestry Of British Bird Song' by field recording pioneer Victor C Lewis (His Master's Voice, 1964).

The Black Dog. Where would we be without the influence of this legendary Sheffield outfit? From the Warp classics 'Bytes' (1993) and 'Spanners' (1995) to last year's gorgeously bleak 'Music For Moore Street Substation' – bathed in said building's "natural reverberation" – Ken Downie and co have always been ahead of the game.

Serge Blenner. Conservatoire de Mulhouse alumnus Blenner released his debut album in 1980 on Sky, the seminal Hamburg imprint. With its eerie blips and squeals, 'La Vogue' is a darkly apprehensive record, reflecting the fearful mood in Germany as Cold War tensions mounted.

Bliss. A synonym for bliss is ecstasy – a very 90s ambient aspiration. But in the sense of a spiritual, serene and euphoric state, where atmospheric tones evoke tranquility, we're in the realms of Laraaji.

Boards Of Canada. Scottish siblings and their sepia synths. BOC's legendary debut, 'Music Has The Right To Children', doused the fire starters of 1990s rave with icy electronic meditations on cults, psychedelia and the pleasures of beautiful places in the country.

Peter Broderick. The American polymath's influence reaches far and wide, including several years with the Danish ensemble Efterklang and session work with the US drone-folk community. His notable solo ambient and neoclassical works include 'Float' (Type Recordings, 2008) and 'Music For Falling From Trees' (Erased Tapes, 2009).

Gavin Bryars. Looping a 1971 recording of an old homeless man singing its touchingly optimistic titular refrain, Bryars' 'Jesus' Blood Never Failed Me Yet' added an ever-evolving orchestral accompaniment to create an ambient experience of overwhelming emotional power.

Harold Budd. The renowned minimalist's output includes two superb collaborations with Brian Eno. 'Ambient 2: The Plateaux Of Mirror' and 'The Pearl' (Editions EG, 1980 and 1984 respectively). The two records have a similar feel, with Budd's contemplative piano subjected to Eno's subtle electronic treatments, the atmospheric productions emphasising the plangent motifs.

Buddha Machines. Created by Beijing electronic duo FM3 and first released in 2005, Buddha Machines are small coloured boxes with switches that alternate between ambient loops. Hide one in your cistern to make people think the plumbing is possessed.

C

Cafe Del Mar. Before it became a global brand for the chill-out scene, the Cafe Del Mar was just one of Ibiza's many beachside bars. That all changed in the early 1990s, when resident DJ José Padilla and guests like Phil Mison and Chris Coco began playing pre-club sundowner sets featuring everything from Cluster and Eno to Alice Coltrane and the Penguin Cafe Orchestra.

John Cage. The "silent" composition that's never quiet, Cage's 1952 signature work '4'33"' forces listeners to become hyper-aware of the sound world around them for the duration of the piece. Way more than an artsy prank, '4'33"' underlined Cage's keen interest in Zen Buddhism.

The Caretaker. Leyland Kirby's work as The Caretaker peaked with 'An Empty Bliss Beyond This World' (2011) and his 'Everywhere At The End Of Time' series (2016-19). Poignant and haunting studies of the effects of Alzheimer's disease, it's alluringly strange and deeply beautiful stuff. Peerless.

Wendy Carlos. Carlos is best-known for turning Bach electronic and soundtracking 'Clockwork Orange' droogs. But don't discount 'Sonic Seasonings', her 1972 ambient collage. Its bucolic bird song and whimsical drones signalled the rise of new age music. Truly transformational.

Chill-Out Rooms. With the rise of superstar DJs came a more sedate phenomenon. Quiet corners in clubs. Playlists full of Brian Eno and Bent. Visuals on walls no better than a screensaver. Mr Scruff's 'Keep It Unreal' rooms even served tea. Make us a brew!

The Chill Out Tent. A buzzing online hub of releases, streams, podcasts and writing operating under the motto "Turn On, Stay In, Chill Out". Launched during lockdown and run by DJ Matt Nearest-Faraway, The Chill Out Tent has so far collaborated with Mixmaster Morris, Mr Scruff, Rob Da Bank and countless others.

Chillstep. When dubstep fans stop swinging their pants, they pull up a pouffe and relax to chillstep. Rameses B's 'I Need You' and Zeds Dead's Aretha-sampling 'Coffee Break', for instance. Teeth-rattling bass is never far off, but you get to have a nice sit down.

Chillwave. Lo-fi producer Washed Out helped birth 2009's "summer of chillwave". In the hyper-focused age of the pixel, this micro-genre blurred our vision. Listen to the scratchy pop of Neon Indian and you too will gently tune out.

Suzanne Ciani. A pioneer in the truest sense, the legendary American ambient synthesist first made a name for herself in the male-dominated world of 1970s sound design. Nominated for no less than five New Age Grammys, her work is forever synonymous with the Buchla modular synthesiser.

Cluster. OG ambient duo comprising Hans-Joachim Roedelius and Dieter Moebius. A run of blissful albums in the 1970s includes two with Eno – 'Cluster & Eno' and 'After The Heat' (as Eno, Roedelius, Moebius) – and is nothing short of a foundational discography of electronic music and ambient beauty.

Coil. Rooted in nihilistic intensity, Coil's John Balance and Peter "Sleazy" Christopherson fused crepuscular drones, musique concrète and paganism in their own gloriously magick way. You'd expect nothing less from a duo who once made a video featuring hallucinogenic putrefaction and Marc Almond as the Angel Of Death.

Contemplative. Ambient music provides us with a vehicle for stepping outside of our busy lives and makes space for us to ask questions of ourselves. Few other genres encourage you to stop, take stock and think as you listen.

D

Dark Ambient. Much like Erik Satie's idea of "furniture music", only with one table leg sawn off, dark ambient is brooding, noisy and unsettling. Coil and Lustmord are generally viewed as the founding fathers, leaving indelible marks on everybody from Nine Inch Nails to Tim Hecker.

Darkroom. Where Michael Bearpark (guitars, pedals and loops) and Andrew Ostler (synths, woodwind and reeds) improvise at great length and to great effect, frequently live but also on albums such as 'Gravity's Dirty Work' (2013) and 'The Last Sense To Fade' (2021).

Dead Can Dance. Lisa Gerrard and Brendan Perry have made lots of powerfully evocative records in their time. 'The Serpent's Egg' (4AD, 1988) – somehow simultaneously sparse and lush, magical yet almost primeval – is a terrific example.

Deathprod. The Norwegian artist Helge Sten has been producing no-compromise doomscapes as Deathprod since the early 1990s. Last year's 'Compositions' album is typically atmospheric and grainy, a gloriously troubling dystopian vision that seems to slow the very fabric of time.

Claude Debussy. Consider Debussy's strikingly beautiful works as the soundtrack to French Impressionism – the equivalent of a Monet, Renoir or Pissarro masterpiece. Listen to 'Prélude À L'Après-Midi D'Un Faune' and hear the birth of a gently radiant, quietly radical musical revolution.

Dedekind Cut. This is Fred Welton Warmsley III from Sacramento, California. After several releases as Lee Bannon, Warmsley adopted the name Dedekind Cut for '$uccessor', a 2016 album which offers a refreshingly contemporary take on ambience, combining cowboy iconography with pounding industrial noise.

Deep Listening. A term coined by the avant-garde composer Pauline Oliveros, "deep listening" involves focused attention and a heightened awareness of surroundings, encouraging meditative engagement with sound. As Oliveros herself put it, "Listening as many ways as possible to everything that can possibly be heard all of the time".

'Deep Mind Music'. A long-running and much-loved mix series curated by London's DJ Sybil. Boasting "imaginal realms for psychonautic exploration", it's a treasure trove of chilled-out and mind-expanding playlists. You'll find 28 mixes on Soundcloud.

Deep Space Network. The inspired – and inspiring – pairing of German artists Jonas Grossmann and David Moufang (aka Move D). Their 1993 'Big Rooms' album on Source Records is an underrated gem, spanning downtempo, techno and acid vibes.

Delia Derbyshire. By the mid-1960s, Derbyshire was creating tape manipulations unparalleled in their otherworldliness. 'The Delian Mode' and 'Blue Veils And Golden Sands' are both journeys to alien worlds so steeped in darkness that even Doctor Who might wince and think twice.

Demdike Stare. With a name taken from the Pendle Witch Trials, this Manchester duo oozes darkness. Explore their 'Elemental' series on Modern Love if you dare. Track titles like 'Mephisto's Lament' and 'We Have Already Died' signal the terrors within. Burn them!

Downtempo. Mood music gets a groove on. In the 1990s, when the term was first used, it was the likes of Fila Brazillia and Kruder & Dorfmeister. These days, Bonobo seems to be leading the way.

Drone. Meditative music using sustained tones and microtonal interactions. Synonymous with Eastern spiritualism. Key figures in the genre are La Monte Young and Marian Zazeela, whose drone studies yielded several versions of their immersive 'Dream House' installation, as well as their celebrated 1982 album, 'The Tamburas Of Pandit Pran Nath'.

Drone Metal. Not to be confused with metal drones shooting Instagrammable videos of lovely landscapes. This subgenre is a trapdoor into a hellscape of apocalyptic audio. Oh joy! Listen to the withering annihilation of Sunn O)))'s 'Black One' (Southern Lord, 2005) and you'll soon see what we mean.

Drone Not Drones. This annual event in Minneapolis employs drone music as a radical act. Artists rotate on and off the stage, creating a single uninterrupted 28-hour drone and raising funds for Doctors Without Borders in the process.

Dub. Minimal. Atmospheric. Transportive. Brimming with weird stuff. From King Tubby to Lee "Scratch" Perry, Prince Jammy, Joe Gibbs, Scientist and beyond, we're talking ambient music for warming up rather than chilling out.

The Durutti Column. The back catalogue of Vini Reilly and his post-punk situationists bulges with ingenuity. Take the pastoral vibes of Reilly's 1980 Factory debut, 'The Return Of The Durutti Column'. Factory would crumble, but the Column marched on. Check the gorgeous 'Grace' on 'Fidelity' (Les Disques Du Crépuscule, 1996).

E

Earth. Droning, feedbacking, distorted guitars – that's the hallmark of Earth's pioneering brand of "ambient metal". The American band's 1993 debut album, misleadingly titled 'Earth 2: Special Low Frequency Version', set a high bar for the drone music that subsequently followed.

ECM. The ECM label dominates the Venn diagram intersection between cutting-edge ambience and improvisational jazz, providing an outlet for the likes of Jon Hassell, Steve Reich and Keith Jarrett. Founded in Munich in 1968, it's still thriving in 2024.

EG. Originally a progressive rock label set up by King Crimson's managers in 1969. EG released Brian Eno's earliest post-Roxy Music work, as well as the first solo albums by King Crimson guitarist Robert Fripp, another ambient godfather. Alex Paterson was working as an A&R man for EG when he started The Orb.

Mark St John Ellis. The man responsible for 'The Empty Vessel', a spellbinding 14-part work crafted with singing bowls in 2020, when Ellis was on leave from his neoclassical project Elijah's Mantle. Dead Can Dance's Lisa Gerrard and Irish folk songstress Caitríona O'Leary are guest vocalists.

Em:t. Superlative ambient offshoot of Nottingham's T:me Records and the coolest label around for a brief while in the mid-1990s. Straddling dub, techno, neoclassical and more, each Em:t release incorporated field recordings and was mixed in immersive 3D. They had some very striking images on their covers too – from penguins to frogs to toucans.

Lawrence English. The Australian ambient maestro and Room40 label founder is a busy man. Last year alone saw him partnering with veteran sound artist David Toop, New York musician Lea Bertucci and Austrian composer Werner Dafeldecker. On 'Colours Of Air', this time with Loscil, English surpasses even himself, with lofty electroacoustic devotionals almost sacred in feel.

Enigma. The singing monks of Enigma's 'Sadeness Part 1' almost made Christmas Number One in 1990. The parent album, 'MCMXC AD', was also an international smash, despite Michael Cretu's decidedly offbeat fusion of sultry Latinate whispers and druggy soundscapes. In nomine Christi, indeed.

Brian Eno. It was Eno's 'Ambient 1: Music For Airports' that gave the genre its name. The title of the 1978 album was prompted by the long hours Eno spent waiting at the airport serving Cologne, a city he visited many times that year in order to work at Conny Plank's studio. Incidentally, the architect of Cologne airport was Paul Schneider-Esleben, who was Florian Schneider's dad.

Environmental Music. The name of this increasingly significant subgenre is a direct translation of the Japanese term "kankyō ongaku". Originating in Tokyo in the late 1970s, it describes music that has been made to reflect and complement the surroundings in which it's played, whether those are natural or man-made.

Ethereal. Early devotional music. Chanting monks. Latin titles. The abstract choral works of Philip Glass. The gothic miasmas of seminal 4AD acts such as This Mortal Coil and Dead Can Dance. Mark St John Ellis' De Nova Da Capo label. All have that translucent and celestial quality that lends itself to the ethereal.

Etiolation. Etiolation refers to how a lack of natural sunlight causes plants to grow in unusual ways. Ambient music, filled with stasis and muted, obscured moments, can shift your sense of perception and impact your state of mind in similarly unpredictable ways.

F

Morton Feldman. One of the earliest proponents of indeterminate music, Feldman's work 'The Rothko Chapel' is a slowly evolving chamber orchestra composition named after a modernist chapel in Houston, Texas. The building is home to 14 of Mark Rothko's black paintings.

Field Recordings. When gear got smaller, musicians went hiking. They recorded chirruping birds, chuffing trains and the patter of drizzle. Chris Watson's 'El Tren Fantasma' is a dramatic example of this alfresco approach. Best listened to on a rope bridge in a subtropical forest.

Fireplace Sounds. An infinite video of a fire in a grate, the flames crackling and the logs popping. Yes, this is a thing now. Many of these have millions of views on YouTube, matching clips of cats falling off sofas. Hogwash to some, ASMR gold to others.

Floating. Forget The Floaters and that "Aquarius... and my name is Ralph" stuff. Floating was invented by The Grid in 1990 and shunted into another dimension the following year by Alex Paterson, who hosted the press launch for The Orb's debut album in a floatation tank. Also known as horizontal keepy-uppy.

John Foxx. By the late 1980s, John Foxx had grown tired of the contemporary pop world. He craved tranquility. Enter ambient music, a genre he's dipped in and out of ever since, notably with 1997's 'Cathedral Oceans', which took over a decade to record.

Nils Frahm. With music that's inexorably intimate and exquisitely spaced, the revered German musician is a master of elegiac minimalism. Bask in 2022's mesmeric 'Music For Animals', which ditches Frahm's trademark piano for extended ambient pieces that glisten with opulent lustre.

'Freezone'. The 'Freezone' compilations, released on SSR between 1994 and 2001, reflected the eclecticism of chill-out electronica, with the first album including David Byrne, Moby, Porcupine Tree, Air, LTJ Bukem, David Cunningham and Deep Forest. The series was put together by DJ Morpheus (Samy Birnbach), the Minimal Compact frontman and host of the long-running Lysergic Factory radio show.

Robert Fripp. Fripp's experiments with live looping enabled him to harness endless sustain and recast the guitar as an expressive instrument of subtle textures. 'Evening Star', his 1975 work with Eno, is 48 minutes of gently swaying tunes at one with the image on the cover, a Peter Schmidt painting of an island poking up through the sea under a darkening sky.

Edgar Froese. Tangerine Dream's main man was fond of the occasional solo ambient excursion, most notably the lengthy title cut of his 1975 album, 'Epsilon In Malaysian Pale'. Inspired by Froese's journeys through the jungles of South-East Asia, it was a major influence on David Bowie's Berlin Trilogy.

The Future Sound Of London. Emerging from the acid house scene of the late 1980s, The Future Sound Of London duo Brian Dougans and Garry Cobain pointed hardcore ravers in another direction entirely with the hypnotic ambient abstractions of their 'Lifeforms' and 'Dead Cities' albums. There was the superb 'Tales Of Ephidrina' too, which the pair issued under the name Amorphous Androgynous.

G

Gaming Audio. Eerie thunderstorms throughout 'The Last Of Us'. Rumbling wagon wheels in 'Red Dead Redemption'. Aggressive street taunts in 'Grand Theft Auto'. We've played console games way past our bedtime again, the in-world atmospherics of these massive digital worlds constantly looping in our minds. Just don't hijack a car in Grove Street gang territory.

GAS. As GAS, Wolfgang Voigt is one of ambient music's most revered and influential names. You can hear the dissemination of his "intoxicatingly sinister" sound art – lying somewhere between Arnold Schönberg and Kraftwerk – across a gamut of contemporary artists and labels. Voigt is also the co-founder of Cologne's Kompakt Records.

Generative Music. A term conceived by Brian Eno to describe systems-based music that continually changes. It started with the Eno-approved Koan program, which launched in 1994, but generative music continues to evolve, with Eno releasing his own app, Bloom, in 2008.

Glacial. The leaden movement of Arctic ice sheets colliding with gargantuan force and the slow-motion slide of Antarctic mountain glaciers. How to capture those sounds? Many brave artists have tried, including Netherworld, Loscil, SleepResearchFacility and Aarktica (obviously).

Glitch. A genre of minimalism for people too frightened to go full ambient. It's like trip hop, but really tiny. Digital clicks, crackling static, the sound of a CD skipping, which you thought was part of your music but, no, your CD player's broken.

Global Communication. As an example of the mid-90s fondness for almost beatless electronic music designed to envelop the listener, they don't come much better than Tom Middleton and Mark Pritchard's '76:14'. Melancholic melodies, ticking clocks and shifting atmospherics make it an all-time great.

Manuel Göttsching. 'E2-E4', the former Ash Ra Tempel guitarist's 1984 solo foray into electronic music, still sounds like he must have had a time machine. More minimalist than ambient, it's a hypnotising outing with a long-tail influence over the ambient techno scene of the late 1980s and 1990s.

H

Laurel Halo. Last year's acclaimed 'Atlas' album saw the American producer truly find her ambient calling. Veering wholeheartedly into rarified orchestral and piano atmospherics, it's a gorgeously woozy and majestic piece of electroacoustic sound design.

Bo Hansson. "By Elbereth and Lúthien the Fair, you shall have...", well, actually, a rather wonderful 1969 album called 'Music Inspired By Lord Of The Rings', the result of Hansson and producer Anders Lind holing themselves up on a remote Scandinavian island with just Tolkien's books and the first 8-track recorder in Sweden for company.

Harmonia & Eno '76. Krautrock supergroup Harmonia – Cluster plus Michael Rother from Neu! – had been experimenting with Korg synths and Revox tapes for three years when Eno turned up at their woodland commune in Lower Saxony in 1976. The result was the pellucid ambient/kosmische album 'Tracks And Traces'. It remained unreleased until 1997, but it still sounds astonishing.

Jon Hassell. Hassell's roots in the avant-garde and his processed and airy trumpet playing made his work a haunting blend of global influences and electronic textures. 'Fourth World, Vol 1 – Possible Musics', his 1980 collaboration with Eno, is timeless.

'Hearts Of Space'. This American radio show has segued together a seamless hour of contemplative ambience each and every week for an astonishing 50 years. It was founded in 1973 by the honey-voiced Stephen Hill, who remains the man in charge. "Safe journeys, space fans, wherever you are..."

Tim Hecker. The scope of Hecker's talents is quite extraordinary. Which is why it's tricky to single out a particular work by the Canadian experimental producer. Well, it would be if 'Harmony In Ultraviolet' (Kranky, 2006), a masterpiece of drone and texture, wasn't regarded as one of the finest ambient records of all time by pretty much everybody.

Higher Intelligence Agency. Formed by Birmingham musician and DJ Bobby Bird, who also hosted the Oscillate club night, HIA have a string of top-notch ambient dub albums to their name, particularly 'Colourform' and 'Freefloater' (Beyond, 1993 and 1995 respectively). HIA and Oscillate are both still going strong.

Home Normal. Ian Hawgood founded his influential label, Home Normal, in 2008 when he was living in Tokyo. Records from the likes of David Toop, Nicolas Benier, David Cordero and Hawgood himself have established the imprint as a leading player in a particularly relaxing field.

Ernest Hood. Already 52 in 1975 when he recorded his only studio album, 'Neighbourhoods', Hood attempted to recreate the sounds and atmosphere of his Oregon childhood with woozy analogue synths and decades' worth of field recordings. He succeeded with evocative aplomb.

Haruomi Hosono. The Yellow Magic Orchestra co-founder's 1984 cassette 'Watering A Flower' features two tracks originally commissioned by Japanese retailer MUJI as in-store background music. Sparse, eerie and super-rare, it's become a collectable holy grail.

Hypnosis. Global Communication might have been attempting this with the pendulum swing of '14:31' from '76:14'. Ambient music's ability to empty the mind of distractions and put the listener in a trance is one of its many understated superpowers.

I

Iasos. One of the earliest new age musicians – Iasos made his recording debut with 'Inter-Dimensional Music' on Unity Records in 1975. The spiritual and blissful warmth that resonates through tracks such as 'Cloud Prayer' and 'The Bubble Massage' seems fitting for a man once described as "giving the impression of having come from another sphere".

I Ching. The ancient Chinese 'Book Of Changes' suggests interpretations and explanations of the patterns created when yarrow stalks or coins are thrown. John Cage used the outputs in his "chance" compositions and Eno's 'Oblique Strategies' are a direct descendant.

Illbient. Hip hop and trip hop roll up a blunt under the Brooklyn Bridge. The snoozy sounds of DJ Olive are a fine introduction to the subgenre's bassy treats, as is his blissed-out trio We™.

Immersion. Put on your headphones. Close your eyes. Press play. Breathe deeply while you listen. Fully absorb yourself in the music as it unfolds. Let it wrap itself around you, your senses and your consciousness. Immerse yourself completely. Don't put those sausages under the grill before you do any of this, though.

Impressionism. Not only the domain of French "plein air" painters, Impressionism might take the form of the sound of the wind, the patter of rain, or the trill of bird song to evoke a mood, an atmosphere or a particular scene.

J

Philip Jeck & Chris Watson. It's fitting that the much-missed composer and turntablist Philip Jeck recorded his final album with his old friend Chris Watson. Based on Watson's recordings of a level crossing near Hull, with Jeck's wonderfully wonky treatments, textures and effects adding grainy lustre and drama, 'Oxmardyke' (Touch, 2023) is a stunning epitaph.

Jóhann Jóhannsson. The Icelandic composer received Oscar nominations for two immersive film scores, 'The Theory Of Everything' and 'Sicario', in the couple of years before his untimely death in 2018. Comprising piano-led elegance and sinister soundscapes respectively, they perfectly showcase Jóhannsson's huge talent.

K

Kaleidoscopic. The meta-text of ambient music transports us through a cinema of the imagination, often by means of subtle kaleidoscopic tones and textures. Whether it's Eno's studied vapours, Coil's crepuscular atmospherics or Seahawks' sunlit future exotica, there's always more to the genre than meets the eye.

'Kankyō Ongaku'. Released by Light In The Attic in 2019, this collection of Japanese environmental music spans the period 1980 to 1990. Featuring Ryuichi Sakamoto, Joe Hisaishi and Haruomi Hosono, the pieces were often commissioned by corporations for cultural cachet and used commercially, some in stores and others on advertisements.

Kettel & Secede. Dutch producers Reimer Eising and Lennard Van Der Last joined forces in 2012 for 'When Can', a jaw-dropping one-off collection. Cloistered monks, sumptuous strings and military beats combine to create a lavishly florid form of ambience.

Klein. British-Nigerian musician Klein fuses R&B-inspired vocals with oddball noises and metallic drones, forming truly unique soundscapes. Her 'Harmattan' album (Pentatone, 2021), a grainy, gritty collage of patched-together samples, is mostly ambient but also something altogether more challenging.

The KLF. Baaaaa. Thus goes the reinvention of The Justified Ancients Of Mu Mu as ambient pioneers The KLF. Nomadic throat singing and Hawaiian guitars on their 1990 'Chill Out' album indicated the eccentricities to come, namely horned tribalism and ice cream vans. And the bleat goes on.

KMRU. Kenyan artist Joseph Kamaru incorporates drones, field recordings and improvisation into his reflective ambient pieces. His thoughtful use of environmental sounds makes him one of the scene's most intriguing new talents.

Thomas Köner. On first listen, the records of German multimedia artist Thomas Köner seem empty and almost silent. Turn up the volume and early works like 'Permafrost' (Barooni, 1993) become noise-filled sound worlds of constant, dramatic movement. Loud music presented very, very quietly.

L

Andrew Lagowski. Lagowski has created a host of wonderfully evocative and epic dreamscapes and spacescapes over the last 35 years, the best of them under the names SETI (the hour-long 'Final Trajectory') and Legion ('Colossus' and 'The Somnambulist'). His latest release is SETI's 'Beyond East Gate', which is inspired by a spate of UFO sightings in Suffolk in 1980.

The Land Of Oz. When Paul Oakenfold started his post-Spectrum acid club at Heaven in London in 1989, he invited Alex Paterson, Jimmy Cauty and Youth to play music in the VIP room. Faffing around on decks, cassette players and a trusty Akai sampler, together they invented live ambient house. Not a bad way to spend a Monday night.

Laraaji. Brian Eno witnessed the revelation of zither-playing new age mystic Laraaji busking in New York in the late 1970s and began rehearsing with him soon afterwards. The sessions resulted in 'Ambient 3: Day Of Radiance' (Editions EG, 1980), on which Eno adds subtle touches of stardust to Laraaji's hypnotic musicality to stunning effect.

Bill Laswell. Label boss, producer, bassist, unique musical alchemist (who else could work with Whitney Houston and Napalm Death's Mick Harris?) and serious practitioner of the ambient arts. He's appeared on Eno's 'Ambient 4: On Land' as well as many of his own ambient excursions.

Legowelt. Dutch producer Danny Wolfers is experimental lo-fi house artist Legowelt. His latest project is a 100-minute film titled 'Ambient Trip Commander', the inspired storyline of which is elevated further by the highly immersive and ominous score.

K Leimer. Seattle-based veteran K Leimer (Kerry to his chums) has been quietly honing his cosmic, piano-led compositions since the late 1970s, much of it on his own Palace Of Lights imprint. Newbies should check out 'A Period Of Review (Original Recordings 1975-1983)', recently released via RVNG Intl.

Loop Guru. Ethereal vocals and hypnotic gamelan sounds are the main components of Loop Guru's 1994 classic 'The Third Chamber'. It lasts a lifetime and is joyous from start to finish. There are some exquisite soul-ticklers on the band's 'Catalogue Of Desires' tapes too.

Loscil. Loscil is Vancouver musician Scott Morgan. The highlights of his extensive back catalogue include 'Submers' (Kranky, 2002), every track of which is named after a submarine. The final track, 'Kursk', is particularly moving, and as suffocatingly transportive as one might expect of a paean to the victims of the 2000 Russian submarine disaster.

Lull. Once the drummer of Napalm Death and later the driving force behind Scorn, Mick Harris has forged new sonic extremes with his Lull project. 'Moments', an isolationist drone epic from 1998 made up of 99 short pieces, is a key release.

Lustmord. Brian Williams has long been a leading light of dark ambient. So to speak. His first Lustmord release was back in 1981, and he's worked with everyone from Chris & Cosey and Clock DVA to sludge metal outfit The Melvins. Start with 'The Place Where The Black Stars Hang' (Soleilmoon, 1994) and you'll never come back.

M

Kali Malone. Stockholm organist Kali Malone's innovative drones evoke a raw elemental power. She is among the most promising of the new generation of ambient-leaning minimalists, evidenced by the exquisite evolving harmonies of her current album, 'Does Spring Hide Its Joy'.

Gigi Masin. The Italian composer and producer is best-known for 'Wind', the 1986 album he initially pressed on vinyl to sell at his concerts. Most of the copies were later destroyed in a flood at his Venice home but, thankfully, the master tapes survived, and this jazz-tinged opus has become an ambient cornerstone.

Matthewdavid. LA producer Matthew David McQueen has put out four fine albums, including two featherlight and positively new age recordings as Matthewdavid's Mindflight. He's about to be thrust further into the limelight by his key role on André 3000's 'New Blue Sun'. Take a look at his Leaving imprint for lots more radiance.

Meditation Apps. Immersive meditation apps have become daily rituals for many of us, helping with stress, sleep and focus. Calm's guided meditations are backed by lulling ambient soundscapes, while the generative music app Endel creates personalised sound environments to heal and free your mind. Switch off and float downstream...

Minimal. What would music sound like with most of the music removed? Pretty good, it turns out. Let's face it, there are plenty of times when the noise and clatter of everyday life could do with being filtered out. Is minimalism ambient? Discuss.

Mixmaster Morris. Acid house pioneer Morris Gould laid off the heart-pounding bpms at the turn of the 1990s, with his 'Flying High' album – recorded as The Irresistible Force – becoming a template for the decade's chill-out vibe. He's also responsible for "I Think Therefore I Ambient", one of the best T-shirt slogans ever.

Modular. From 1960s pioneers like Doug McKechnie to current knob-twiddlers such as Polypores and Field Lines Cartographer, a modular rack the size of a wardrobe has always occupied a substantial corner of the ambient world. And, to be honest, most of the other corners as well.

Moebius. Usually known simply by his surname, Dieter Moebius is an electronic music luminary, and not just for his work with Hans-Joachim Roedelius in Cluster and Harmonia. His solo sonic explorations – dating back to the 1970s and often marked by modular synth wizardry – resonate with avant-garde innovation and atmospheric allure.

'Monolithic Undertow'. Published in 2022, Harry Sword's excellent book traces the inordinate "power of the drone", encompassing Ash Ra Tempel, archaeoacoustics, Faust, Sufi mystics, Sunn O))) and a surfeit of other esoteric references.

Motion Ward. Jesse Sappell launched his Los Angeles label in 2015, and things have been in, ahem, constant motion since then. Check out the recent releases by The Humble Bee and Hysterical Love Project for a gently modern take on the ambient experience.

'Music Beyond Airports'. A collection of essays developed from presentations given at Ambient@40, an international conference on the genre held at Huddersfield University in 2018. Papers such as Is Ambient Music Socially Relevant? and Channelling The Ecstasy Of Hildegard Von Bingen make up a compelling tome.

Music From Memory. Founded a decade ago in Amsterdam by Jamie Tiller, Abel Nagengast and Tako Reyenga, this essential contemporary ambient label boasts a wide-ranging roster of international artists that includes Philipp Otterbach, Dream Dolphin and the much-lauded ISOR29.

My Ambient Machines. A printed love letter to the machines behind ambient music, this lovingly assembled fanzine and cassette label is curated by Sweden's Oskar Karlström. The zine features contributions from artists discussing their music-making processes and their gear of choice.

N

Pete Namlook. Peter Kuhlmann emerged in the early 1980s from the Frankfurt electronic scene, flipping his surname to create his artist name. His back catalogue includes a host of collaborations with the likes of Klaus Schulze, Bill Laswell, Dr Atmo, Mixmaster Morris and Move D, many of who appeared on his hugely influential Fax imprint.

Neoclassical. Atmospheric, brooding and frequently found in the domain of film soundtracks, the genre draws on a palette of traditional instrumentation and contemporary electronics. Popularised by the likes of Hannah Peel, Ólafur Arnalds and Nils Frahm.

Netherworld. Much of Alessandro Tedeschi's work as Netherworld is based around field recordings of glaciers or waterfalls, but he's also manipulated sounds generated by the aurora borealis. The gloriously icy 'Over The Summit' from 2011 is a great starting point. Tedeschi is also the founder and boss of the superb Glacial Movements label.

New Age. Rooted in the Mind, Body & Spirit movement that started in 1970s California and developed through meditation retreats, a growing number of the current generation of ambient artists seem to be taking their cues from the healing intent at the heart of the new age scene.

New Age Grammys. Presented to the "Best New Age, Ambient Or Chant Album", this Grammy category was launched in 1987 and has previously been won by Peter Gabriel, Mark Isham, Shadowfax and Kitarō. The 2024 winner will be announced at next month's awards ceremony.

Phill Niblock. Using layered tones in dense and often atonal tunings, Niblock's music is characterised by long passages and restless harmonic movements. For a good overview of his work, seek out 'A Young Person's Guide' (Blast First, 1995). The photographer-turned composer has been the head of the Experimental Intermedia Foundation in New York for almost 40 years.

Nico. There will never be another Nico. Take her 1974 version of The Doors' 'The End', which eschews the psychedelic tropes of the original and is full of episodic sound interventions – from the droning harmonium that was a regular feature of her work to John Cale's domineering piano and Phil Manzanera's textural guitar.

Richard Norris. One of the UK's most prolific electronicists – The Grid (with Dave Ball), Beyond The Wizard's Sleeve (with Erol Alkan) – Norris' recent ambient works carry a deep spiritual resonance. Last year, he released a quite remarkable 12-part series called 'Music For Healing', with a new volume available on the first day of every month, each of them consisting of two 20-minute pieces.

O

'Obscure Sound'. Compiled by esteemed Tokyo DJ and record store owner Chee Shimizu, 'Obscure Sound' is an expansive catalogue of 600 albums, categorised into genres including "organic", "spiritual", "cosmic" and "floating". The book is 10 years old now, but it's still an ambient crate digger's dream.

'Ocean Of Sound'. David Toop's 2001 book is an astonishing work. A hugely respected experimental musician, curator and writer, Toop interviewed everyone from Brian Eno and Sun Ra to Kate Bush and Lee "Scratch" Perry, drawing the historical strands of immersive electronic music into a narrative that feels almost ambient in its own right.

Pauline Oliveros. A visionary genius, Oliveros co-founded the San Francisco Tape Music Center in the early 1960s. She worked at the avant-garde music lab with Morton Subotnick, Terry Riley and Steve Reich before coming up with the concept of deep listening, as explored with fellow members of the beautifully meditative Deep Listening Band.

Oneohtrix Point Never. American producer Daniel Lopatin signed to Warp in 2013, but his work as OPN first came to the attention of the wider public with 'Rifts' (No Fun, 2009), a compilation of his early synth recordings. 'Replica' (Mexican Summer, 2012), which wove fragmented TV jingles into dark drones, consolidated this success.

The Orb. Where to begin? So many astounding sounds, so little space. Especially once we've mentioned 'A Huge Ever Growing Pulsating Brain That Rules From The Centre Of The Ultraworld' – Minnie Riperton and all – a track that's every bit as thrilling now as it was 35 years ago. Arise, Sir Alex Paterson.

Otherworldly. Unknown planets. The mysteries of the galaxy. The final frontier. Many artists have tried to tap into that innate "otherworldliness" – Pole's '3', Cold Womb Descent's 'Ldaovh Trilogy', Robert Scott Thompson's 'Pale Blue Dot', NGC 3019's 'Exoplanet Atmospheres' and Sound Of Space Project's 'Celestial Incantations' – to name a few.

P

Pablo's Eye. As nebulous as ambient music itself, this abstract collective from Belgium formed in 1989. Led by Axel Libeert, their influential output veers from placid to psychotropic, and thanks to reissues by the Stroom imprint, they've amassed new fans in recent times.

Charlemagne Palestine. One of the American minimalist's most significant works is 'Four Manifestations On Six Elements', a sublime sonic journey over six tracks and part of Palestine's quest to find what he called "the golden sound" – a pure essence – via electronics and piano. It was first issued as a private pressing in 1974, but can now be found on Bandcamp.

Marta De Pascalis. Five albums into her stride, Berlin-based Italian sound artist Marta De Pascalis uses tape loops and synths to make what you might call intense ambient. An oxymoron, perhaps, but rule-breaking thrills ahoy!

Phew. Disorienting electronics and manipulated vocals define one-time punk singer Phew's solo output over the last 10 years, but the Japanese experimentalist's forays into ambient areas are equally arresting, especially on tracks such as 'The Very Ears Of Morning' and 'In The Waiting Room'.

Richard Pike. One third of former Warp outfit PVT, founder of the Salmon Universe label and an award-winning TV soundtrack composer, Australian multi-instrumentalist Pike records elegant ambient music as a member of Forgiveness and as a solo artist under the name Deep Learning.

Pink Floyd. The Mogadon warmth of some of Pink Floyd's work places them in the ambient vector – the dreamy and oddball passages of 'Echoes', the ominous synth drone of 'Obscured By Clouds' or the opening glide of 'Shine On You Crazy Diamond'. Or 'The Dark Side Of The Moon' in its entirety in the company of a Camberwell Carrot.

Pioneering. Pushing the envelope, albeit often in a quiet fashion. Innovative techniques, new technologies and different ways of thinking have been applied across the many iterations of ambient, enabling its creators to ultimately redefine what music can be.

Plastikman. Abandoning his early acid workouts, Richie Hawtin took minimal techno to new heights with his third Plastikman album, the cavernous and all-enveloping 'Consumed' (Novamute, 1998). He revisited the record with the help of celebrated pianist Chilly Gonzales a couple of years ago.

The Polyphonic Spree. 'A Long Day', the final 36-minute track on 'The Beginning Stages Of...', the Spree's 2002 debut album, is an audacious marathon of processed voices. It's probably the first time a lot of indie kids experienced anything that sounded remotely ambient.

'Pop Ambient'. Kompakt's acclaimed compilation series dates back to 2001, with a fresh volume appearing every year. Tracks for each release are selected by Kompakt co-founder and GAS man Wolfgang Voigt, with The Orb, Tim Hecker, Alva Noto and The Field among the long list of contributors.

Popol Vuh. Florian Fricke's shapeshifting German collective swung between krautrock, kosmische and prog, but their quasi-mystical and ambient-leaning releases such as 'Affenstunde' (1970) and 'Hosianna Mantra' (1972) are extraordinary.

Q

Quiet. Quiet is an endangered state, almost impossible to experience in our hyper-normalised society. The illusion of quietness is one of the great attractions of ambient music.

Quiet Details. Curated by Al Gold, aka Fields We Found, Quiet Details began operations early last year, with artists invited to offer a response to the name of the label. The Humble Bee, Field Lines Cartographer, Cat Tyson Hughes and Luke Sanger are among the contributors so far.

R

Lou Reed. It's probably not a name you'd expect to see here. Reed's final solo album, however, the recently reissed 'Hudson River Wind Meditations' from 2007, is rooted in ornate and compelling ambient soundscapes, reflecting his love of drone music and his passion for tai chi, yoga and meditation. 'Metal Machine Music' it ain't.

Repetition. Repeat after Eno, "Repetition is a form of change". In musical terms, it proves that getting caught in a (tape) loop can be not so much a dead end, but rather a catalyst for change.

The Residents. The American art-rock collective enjoyed the odd concept album – and some of them were extremely odd. 'Eskimo', released in 1979 on their own Ralph imprint, is The Residents' avant-ambient masterpiece, an imaginary world of found sounds and sonic collages created on home-made instruments.

Ottorino Respighi. One of the leading Italian composers of the 20th century, Respighi wrote three orchestral tone poems about Rome between 1916 and 1928. The most notable of these, 'Pines Of Rome' (1924), evokes the pine trees of the Villa Borghese gardens. The third movement includes field recordings of birds played alongside the orchestra on a Brunswick phonograph.

Reversing Lorries. We've all heard dark ambient tracks that are reminiscent of this, right? Years ago, you knew where you were with trucks and their "Warning, vehicle reversing" message. But what's the new rasping sound? It's horrible. There's no greater sleight to Eno's legacy than an HGV backing into an alley. Make it stop.

Robert Rich. His career began in the 1980s with all-night, live performances in San Francisco that attempted to influence the dreams of sleeping audience members. Rich went on to pioneer his own organic ambience, however, and these "glurp" techniques are showcased most eloquently on his splendidly squelchy 'Bestiary' album (Relapse, 2001).

Charles Richard. Richard's 'Sonic Earth' was a definitive Glacial Movements release from 2021. Through vibrational, state-of-the-art surface speakers, the Royal College of Art alumnus essentially synthesises the sounds of rocks, exposing the revelatory hum of the planet's resonating geology.

Terry Riley. The line between ambience and minimalism is thin, and a brace of albums from Californian maverick Riley straddle it effortlessly. 'A Rainbow In Curved Air' (CBS, 1969) is a hypnotic studio production, while 'Persian Surgery Dervishes' (Shandar, 1972) comprises thrilling live workouts on the electric organ.

Roedelius. Hans-Joachim Roedelius, often known simply as Roedelius, co-founded Berlin's Zodiak Free Arts Lab with Conrad Schnitzler as well as partnering Dieter Moebius in Cluster and Harmonia. As a solo artist, he's also produced some of the most sublime ambient instrumentals of the 20th century and his influence is everywhere – from Eno and Bowie through to Stereolab, Max Richter and Tim Hecker.

Run-Off Grooves. Listening to your favourite record? Dozed off on the sofa? What you wake up to is the sound of the needle dragging along the run-off groove, a never-ending loop of scrapes and crackles. It can be quite therapeutic, but you'll have to pop to Richer Sounds for a new needle.

Dasha Rush. A Russian-born French citizen, Dasha Rush creates delicate swirls of atmospheres and textures for her exquisite and avant-garde ambient work. Her recent album 'Contemplating' nudges at the border of sound art.

S

The Sabres Of Paradise. For the purposes of this list, it's all about 'Smokebelch II'. The closing track of 'Sabresonic', The Sabres Of Paradise's 1993 debut album, it's arguably Andrew Weatherall's finest composition. As one YouTube commenter put it – "quite possibly the greatest sunrise track ever made".

Ryuichi Sakamoto. The ardent sonic adventurer's late-career albums, particularly 2017's 'Async' and last year's '12' (both on his Commmons label) are exquisitely wrought and reflective gems, with Sakamoto at his most spartan and an all-pervading sense of memento mori hanging heavy.

Marta Salogni & Tom Relleen. The Italian producer's 'Music For Open Spaces' album was one of 2023's best. Composed with her late partner, Tom Relleen, the tracks are inspired by physical and metaphysical spaces. Spontaneously improvised, dreamlike and emotive, they pull at your heartstrings. Do as Salogni says and "just let yourself drift and wander, as you wish".

Erik Satie. The French composer's delicate, mesmerising piano works echo loudly through ambient music. Crucially, Satie's concept of what he called "furniture music" – something that could exist in the background, important but unobtrusive – was a key influence on Eno's proto-ambient album 'Discreet Music' (Obscure, 1975).

Scanner. From his early releases via Touch Music, featuring intercepted phone conversations, to his numerous site-specific installations, Robin Rimbaud has challenged the foundational principles of ambient music many times over. 'Sound Surface', the live improvisation he created with the American sound and visual artist Stephen Vitiello in 2004, was Tate Modern's first sonic art commission.

Ulrich Schnauss. With their ethereal evocations and uplifting chord progressions, Schnauss' defining albums 'Far Away Trains Passing By' and 'A Strangely Isolated Place' (City Centre Offices, 2001 and 2003 respectively) swirl with lush textures. Plug in and – in the words of the man himself – "leave reality behind for a while".

Klaus Schulze. Swathed in minimal soundscapes and hypnotic drones, Schulze's transcendental 'Irrlicht' album (Ohr, 1972) was a huge statement of intent. The krautrock legend's 'The Dark Side Of The Moog' collaborations with Pete Namlook in the 1990s – trippy, atonal ambient and kosmische jams – also deserve a mention.

Paul Schütze. The Australian sound designer made his debut with 'Deus Ex Machina' (Extreme, 1989), a dramatic piece that slowly unfolds over the course of an hour. Between installations, scores, operas and live performances, Schütze is a relentless quiet music innovator.

The 'Seagram' Murals. Commissioned in 1958 for New York's Four Seasons restaurant, Mark Rothko's 'Seagram' murals were a series of paintings intended to upset the diners, but he withdrew them before they were installed. Rothko later gave some of them to the Tate. Ominous, sinister and impenetrable, they are the physical embodiment of dark ambient.

Seefeel. Emerging into the grunge-obsessed indie scene of the early 1990s, this UK four-piece eschewed plaid shirts to create shiny shoegaze anthems with an electronic shimmer. Sarah Peacock's floating vocals lend additional ethereal class to their breakthrough album, 'Quique' (Too Pure, 1993).

Shakkei. A Japanese word crudely translating as "borrowed scenery". It refers to the concept of creating spaces that blend seamlessly with landscapes existing beyond a particular boundary, an illusion of depth often paralleled in ambient music composition.

Sky. Günter Körber wasted no time in recruiting some big hitters when he launched Sky Records in Hamburg in the mid-1970s. The superlative 'Cluster & Eno' collaboration set the tone and the addition of a post-Neu! Michael Rother ensured further prestige for the German label.

'Sleep'. One of Andy Warhol's earliest silent film experiments, 'Sleep' (1964) lasted over five hours and featured close-up shots of the poet John Giorno sleeping. Any sections where Giorno became restless were edited out, filling the film with small and subtle moments.

The Slow Music Movement. "Lazy days, hazy moments and dancing to a slower groove..." The Slow Music Movement began life as a discerning blog curating laid-back sounds from the furthest imaginable corners and has now launched its own label. TSMM's next offering is 'Null Point' by London musician Wil Bolton, who specialises in warm and emotive melodies.

The Slow Music Project. Focusing on textural and environmental music, this acclaimed improv outfit was active for just a couple of years in the mid-2000s. Led by multi-instrumentalist Bill Rieflin, who worked with everyone from Ministry to King Crimson, it featured Robert Fripp and Hector Zazou.

Space. A chunk of the material on Space's self-titled 1990 album was meant for The Orb's debut, but Jimmy Cauty, Alex Paterson's original partner, retooled a weekend's worth of Oberheim synth jams into a solo mission. Cauty released the result, a trip to the edge of the solar system, via KLF Communications.

Space Music. We may not be able to physically travel to distant galaxies, but space music aims to take us there via atmospheric and ethereal soundscapes, with synthesised textures, unfurling drones and minimalistic rhythms evoking the vastness and the mystery of the universe.

Spacemen 3. Peak highs don't come much higher than the segued 'Ecstasy Symphony' and 'Transparent Radiation' on Spacemen 3's 'The Perfect Prescription' (Fire, 1987). A heady, psychedelic, mind-melting reflection of coming up.

'Spaciousness'. Two key Lo Recordings compilations showcasing the new wave of ambient, new age and deep listening artists – Vanishing Twin, India Jordan and Abul Mogard, for instance – as well as reintroducing classic works from figures such as Laraaji and Iasos.

Laurie Spiegel. 'The Expanding Universe' (Philo, 1980), Spiegel's landmark electronic album, is an early exploration of the vast possibilities of computer-generated music. Using algorithmic composition, it's an expansive and hugely atmospheric journey, capturing the essence of the cosmos as she saw it.

Spotted Peccary Music. "Deep, vast, introspective soundscapes" have been the focus of this American label for more than three decades, with artists such as David Helpling, Deborah Martin, AeTopus and Bart Hawkins producing music that has a strong connection to nature.

Stars Of The Lid. Adam Wiltzie and Brian McBride, who sadly passed away just a few months ago. Stars Of The Lid's broad ambient/drone driftscapes ooze with widescreen melancholy, like the resigned sigh of a weary world. Wiltzie's other projects – A Winged Victory For The Sullen, Aix Em Klemm and The Dead Texan – are well worth your time too.

Pauline Anna Strom. West Coast synthesist, medium and healer, Strom's visionary music – astral, futuristic, radiant and spiritual, somewhere between kosmische and new age – is all the more remarkable considering she was born blind. A selection of her material can be found on 'Trans-Millenia Music', a compilation released by RVNG Intl in 2017.

Subliminal. Despite the ominous connotations, there's no manipulative hidden agenda here. Ambient's low-volume whispers and barely perceptible melodies can transport us out of a state of analytical thinking, directly influencing our mood and our emotions. Just to double-check, you didn't put those sausages under the grill, did you?

David Sylvian. Sylvian's post-Japan work has often strayed into ambient territory. His explorations of the beauty of emptiness with chums such as Fripp, Sakamoto and Czukay can be found on the 'Camphor' compilation (Venture, 2002), while 'When Loud Weather Buffeted Naoshima' (Samadhisound, 2007) is a 70-minute piece of sound art that will alter your environment.

T

Midori Takada. Japanese percussionist and composer inspired by the minimalism of Steve Reich. Takada's 1983 debut album, 'Through The Looking Glass', is a fragile, powerfully transcendent collection of four multi-instrumental pieces that has been latterly heralded as a pioneering ambient work.

Tangerine Dream. Tangerine Dream have bossed many areas of electronic music over the last 50-plus years, but their classic pieces are minimalist compositions and dreamlike sequences, immersive sonic landscapes that transcend conventional forms of music. 'Phaedra', their milestone 1974 album, is in a league of its own.

Irv Teibel. New age pioneer Irv Teibel released 11 volumes of his 'Environments' albums of field recording between 1969 and 1979, using early IBM computers to create lengthy soundscapes. "Fantastic for making love!" announced the sleeve of the first LP. The series is now available as an app.

Teleplasmiste. Mark O Pilkington and The Utopia Strong's Michael J York are an unorthodox and esoteric duo. See 'To Kiss Earth Goodbye' (Strange Attractor, 2020). They're a dangerous live prospect too, performing in a disused aeronautical wind tunnel through a 42-piece PA, making the audience's eyeballs vibrate in their sockets.

Therapy. Ambient music as a therapeutic tool for mindfulness came into its own during the global pandemic. The number of releases in 2020 is a strong indication of how much both artists and listeners were drawn to comforting, enveloping sounds.

This Is Darkness. An encyclopaedic blog for fans of dark ambient. Edited by Marylander Michael Barnett, the site features news, interviews, reviews of records, films and books, exclusive mixes and loads more.

This Mortal Coil. Was there ever a pop record – and as crushingly melancholic as it frequently gets, it is most assuredly a pop record – more atmospheric than 'It'll End In Tears', This Mortal Coil's first album? Not on your nelly.

'Times Square'. The most overlooked ambient sounds ever. Created in 1977 by percussionist and artist Max Neuhaus, the 'Times Square' installation transmits soothing tones from a subway grate between 45th and 46th Streets, right in the chaotic, noisy, tourist-thronged heart of Manhattan.

Tone Poems. A piece of music inspired by a non-musical source, whether a poem, a book, a play or something else entirely. The term was first coined in the 19th century and it's essentially about giving context to sound. Think Tchaikovsky's 'Romeo And Juliet'. Or better yet, Eno's 'Music For Airports'.

Penelope Trappes. Considering it comprises nothing more than her vocals, a piano and a reel-to-reel tape deck, Trappes' 2023 album 'Heavenly Spheres' is a work of profoundly intricate proportions, at times resembling an orchestra of the undead.

Michal Turtle. Turtle crafted his 1983 album 'Music From The Living Room', a lo-fi homage to Eno's wonkiest pop, after turning his parents' Croydon home into a makeshift studio. He remains ultra-underground, but the 2016 compilation 'Phantoms Of Dreamland' is a further delightful dive into his curious lagoon.

Jon Tye. Tye has certainly made his mark over the last 30-odd years – from post-rave bliss-outs with Pete Smith as MLO, to his future-ambient Seahawks and Ocean Moon projects. See Seahawks' exceptional 'Eternal Beams' album with Laraaji (Ocean Moon, 2018). He also runs Lo Recordings, who released the outstanding 'Spaciousness' series.

U

The Universe. The cosmos apparently emits a super-low hum that radiates throughout space. It's to do with gravitational waves or pulsars or something. Or maybe it's just Professor Brian Cox reviving his old band D:Ream as an ambient project.

Unsound. An annual music festival that takes place in Kraków, Poland, Unsound celebrates all sorts of "emerging, experimental and left-field music". Previous ambient-skewed acts have included The Caretaker, Ben Frost, Claire Rousay and Heinali.

Uplifting. So much ambient music glimmers and resonates with feel-good escapism. Try Boards Of Canada's 'Olson', Ashra's 'Deep Distance', Floating Points' 'Requiem For CS70 And Strings' or Arooj Aftab's 'Island No 1' for an instant hit. Tingles guaranteed.

V

Vangelis. Is Vangelis' 'Blade Runner' the greatest film soundtrack ever? Well, er, yes. With its slowly swaying electronic textures shifting ominously in the main theme, Vangelis crafted what will always be the perfect music for gradually taking in the vastness of a mega-city of the future. Saxophone, though?

Vast. In scope, that is – panoramic vistas, expansive hues, deep listening. Think GAS, Alva Noto, Sarah Davachi, Vladislav Delay and Whatever The Weather.

Veryan. Released only a couple of months ago, 'Reflections In A Wilderness' (Werra Foxma, 2023) is Veryan's most obviously ambient work to date. Inspired by her isolated forest home in Scotland, the enigmatic musician describes the gently twinkling and effortlessly beautiful album as "a love letter to winter".

Stephen Vitiello. NYC sound and visual artist Vitiello recorded at the World Trade Center in 1999, including using contact mics on the windows of the Twin Towers to capture the noises of the streets below. The results, released as 'Sounds Building In The Fading Light' (Creamgardens, 2001), presents the hubbub of Lower Manhattan as muted, ephemeral whispers.

Adelbert Von Deyen. German composer and painter Von Deyen released three albums of ambient music in as many years, beginning with the metallic 'Sternzeit' in 1978. But it's the last of these albums – the vast, Berlin School-esque 'Atmosphere' – that feels the most outward-looking and complete.

W

Whale Sounds. It began when 'Songs Of The Humpback Whale', a 1970 selection of aquatic warbling compiled by bioacoustician Roger Payne, unexpectedly went multi-platinum. Sampled by Pink Floyd and Kate Bush, it established whale song as a crucial component of new age ambience.

Keith Fullerton Whitman. A graduate of Berklee College of Music in Boston, Massachusetts, Whitman is perhaps best-known for his pounding drill 'n' bass tracks under the name Hrvatski, but check out 'Playthroughs' (Kranky, 2002) for a soothing example of feedback-based ambience.

Wind Chimes. The primitive ancestors of generative music. In a gentle breeze, the suspended parts of a wind chime bump against each other, giving outdoor spaces a calming sonic signature.

Patricia Wolf. Organic instrumentation, electronics, voice and field recordings – including of Mount St Helens, where life returned just a few months after the famous volcanic eruption of 1980 – are all hallmarks of Patricia Wolf's take on ambient.

Woob. His bank manager knows him as Paul Frankland, but he's been Woob since the early 1990s. Newcomers should start with 'Woob 1194' (Em:t, 1994), on which frogs, 'Star Trek' samples and hypnotic beats are fused into a heady ambient brew. His two Journeyman albums with Colin Waterton are worth investigating too, especially 'Mama 6' (Ntone, 1994).

X

Iannis Xenakis. As well as his considerable electroacoustic work, the radical Greek-French composer's avant-garde oeuvre was manifested in the spectacular sound and light shows he called "polytopes". Xenakis also project-managed the multimedia Philips Pavilion at Expo 58 in Brussels, with audiences hearing his musique concrète composition, 'Concret PH', as they exited.

Y

Hiroshi Yoshimura. A key figure in environmental music, his 1986 album 'Surround', which was originally commissioned by a Japanese housing company and has just been reissued by Temporal Drift, is a wash of blissful sounds designed to merge with the world around us.

Z

Hector Zazou. Inspired by Satie's minimalism and Peter Gabriel's worldly aesthetic, Zazou's 'Géologies' album (Crammed Discs, 1989) was a groundbreaking hybrid of electronics, orchestra and African timbres, laying the foundations for the French composer's endlessly eclectic work.

Zen. Ditching the beats is certainly one way of inspiring a feeling of calm in listeners. The concept of Zen – that often elusive holy grail of the mind – is one of ambient music's most definitive goals. And if you can't achieve the state of Zen, there's always...

Zzzzz. Soporific ambient music will soon have you nodding off. Max Richter's eight-hour 'Sleep' and Robert Rich's seven-hour 'Somnium' were pretty much designed for that purpose. Eternal favourites like Marconi Union's lulling 'Weightless' and Bibio's lovely 'Phantom Brickworks' will likely do it too. Sweet dreams.

Ambient: Dream State

How do you define ambient music? What's the role of ambient today? And how might it sound in the future? We put these questions and others to our esteemed panel of ambient artists

Interviews: Velimir Ilic

Meet The Panel

Adam Wiltzie
Feted for his ethereal and atmospheric soundscapes, Wiltzie is best-known for his pioneering drone/ambient projects Stars Of The Lid (with Brian McBride), A Winged Victory For The Sullen, The Dead Texan and Aix Em Klemm. He has also written several original scores for film and television, including collaborations with the likes of Jóhann Jóhannsson and Dustin O'Halloran.

Wolfgang Voigt
Producer, DJ and co-founder of iconic Cologne electronic/techno label Kompakt, Wolgang Voigt has released music under countless aliases but he is most renowned for the dense, hypnotic sounds he creates as GAS. In 2019, he was awarded the "Holger Czukay Preis für Popmusik" – a prize recognising exceptional achievements, named after Can's legendary bassist – for his influential work.

Alex Paterson
As co-founder of ambient house trailblazers The Orb in 1988 – with Jimmy Cauty – Paterson achieved massive success with 1991's landmark 'The Orb's Adventures Beyond The Ultraworld', and has continued to fly the Orb flag ever since, working with various collaborators. Their latest studio album 'Prism' was released last year to considerable acclaim.

Marta Salogni
Award-winning artist, producer, engineer and mixer, Marta Salogni has worked with the likes of Depeche Mode, Björk, Holly Herndon, Lucrecia Dalt and a host of others. Granted the accolade of UK Music Producer Of The Year in 2022, she frequently performs live with tape machines, and runs the Free Youth Orchestra charity, giving children greater access to musical instruments and lessons.

Lawrence English
The prolific Australian composer and self-confessed "philosopher of listening" works across various eclectic "aesthetic investigations". A serial collaborator, he's previously hooked up with artists such as William Basinski, Alessandro Cortini, Loscil, David Toop, Scanner and Lea Bertucci, to name just a few, and is also the founder of experimental label Room40.

Phew
Japanese vocalist and electronic/post-punk innovator Phew (aka Hiromi Moritani) started out fronting avant/punk/psych group Aunt Sally in the late 1970s. Having worked with Ryuichi Sakamoto, Can, DAF and others, she's also cultivated a rich and varied solo career. Her self-titled 1981 album, recorded with Jaki Liebezeit and Holger Czukay, was engineered by the legendary Conny Plank, while her key 1992 long-player 'Our Likeness' was reissued last year on Mute.

KMRU
A beacon of ambient and field recording experimentalism, KMRU (Kenyan sound artist Joseph Kamaru) has performed across the world. Having enrolled on a Sound Studies and Sonic Arts programme at Berlin's prestigious Universität der Künste (UDK), he's released work on Warp and Editions Mego, and his most recent album, 2023's 'Dissolution Grip', came out on his own OFNOT label.

Marta De Pascalis
Drawing on ambient, Berlin School and psych tropes, the solo work of Italian sound designer and synthesist De Pascalis is rooted in tape loops, spontaneous improv and repetitive patterns, often to beguiling effect. Based in Berlin, her latest album 'Sky Flesh', a labyrinthine gem of emotion, narrative and mystery, was released last year on Caterina Barbieri's Light-years label.

What does ambient music mean to you?

Wolfgang Voigt: "Ambient is a promise, that beyond mediocrity there is something where calmness reigns. Ambient calms the nerves. It is not an intention but a fact, rigour, responsibility. Ambient is attitude, grandeur, splendour."

Alex Paterson: "It's the beginning of a movement that became ambient house. It means the world to me… it was something we developed as The Orb and it became the template for a few of our albums and remixes for other musicians, like YMO and Front 242."

Marta Salogni: "Ambient music paints a landscape, whether real or abstract, and sings about its forms, allowing us to be transported and immersed in that new environment or state of mind."

Phew: "Music that can be listened to from anywhere, can be stopped anywhere, and resonates comfortably in a room."

Lawrence English: "For me, as a listener and as a musician, ambient is a music of lived moments. It's porous and evolving, a music that hangs in the air as much as it is an atmosphere in itself."

KMRU: "I think I find myself in and out of this ambient cliche genre tag! Although being aware that most of my music fits in this category, 'ambient' music for me is about listening for the sublime… the unsettling ambivalence."

Marta De Pascalis: "A music genre characterised by a focus on specific sound aspects, stripped to its core, mostly contemplative and meditative. The way that is then soaked into many other music genres, shaping their distinctive features, is something that I find really interesting."

Favourite all-time ambient album or track?

Adam Wiltzie: "Brian Eno's 'Thursday Afternoon'. Although this one is 10 years after 'Discreet Music', I reckon it's the one I have fallen asleep to the most."

Wolfgang Voigt: "I wouldn't name any favourites – this leads to irritation and misunderstandings. For decades, groundbreaking ambient albums have been released that have made the world a better place. And there were so many published that didn't."

Marta De Pascalis: "One of the ambient records that struck me back in the day was 'Substrata' by Biosphere – I loved the distinctive glacial moods. Or 'Rainbow Dome Musick' by Steve Hillage, which I used to play a lot for going to sleep after parties. But I have never been a great ambient digger. I've always much preferred kosmische, soundtrack and library music, or electronic, rock and sonic experimentations with ambient influences, rather than strict ambient per se."

Lawrence English: "Wow, not a hard task or anything! If I was to name a piece of music that I have listened to a great deal, and that has brought a sense of atmosphere to the most un-atmospheric places – planes, for instance – then perhaps Donnacha Costello's 'Dry Wretch' could qualify. But I have so many other examples that I could give."

Phew: "Brian Eno's 'Music For Airports'. It introduced the concept of ambient to me, which led me to listen to the work of Obscure Records. I have a personal attachment to it because I made my first album in 1980, in the same studio where it was recorded, via the airport where the idea for the album was born."

Marta Salogni: "'Prati Bagnati Del Monte Analogo' by Raul Lovisoni and Francesco Messina. It gives me a special inner peace, and reminds me of looking at the lake where I was born in Northern Italy at night, with the lights reflecting and trembling on its waters."

KMRU: "Hard to pick one, but I have a soft spot for Klara Lewis' 'Ingrid' track, released on Editions Mego."

Alex Paterson: "Manuel Göttsching's 'E2-E4'."

Best thing about contemporary ambient music?

Lawrence English: "What I respect most about ambient music, from any period, is its invitation to lean in. My favourite ambient works are an encouragement to listen, at all levels. That's not always happening simultaneously, of course, but any work that affords a multiplicity of engagement I hold very highly."

Phew: "I don't listen to music with an awareness of its production date, so I don't know what ambient music is like today. I marvel at the delicacy of expression, perhaps because digital technology has made it possible to produce sound-like etchings with the precision of a copperplate print."

Alex Paterson: "It's not dead. And it's not all about The KLF."

Adam Wiltzie: "I am not going to blow smoke up ambient music's posterior. Some techniques have evolved in a certain way but the underlying concept – at least emotionally – still feels much the same. If you look at a Winged Victory For The Sullen song I wrote recently, it could have been on a Stars Of The Lid recording 20 years ago. It would be a tragic waste of words to put one of these recordings on a higher level than the other. I would maybe argue the listener has changed much more than the creator."

Marta Salogni: "We have new instruments and technologies which allow us to make music with even deeper sounds, and more vivid colours and nuances. Use all the frequencies and push all the dynamics like never before."

KMRU: "I think ambient is progressing in different forms, and it's fascinating to see. The community is small and there's always support for artists making ambient music."

Wolfgang Voigt: "One of the best things about ambient, as I see it, is that it's not contemporary but timeless. I don't follow ambient in the sense of current events. Ambient either happens or it doesn't."

Marta De Pascalis: "I don't really know, to be honest. Sometimes I do research for mixtapes or DJ sets – I listen to new ambient releases and most of the time I find it too obvious for my taste, so I end up picking other stuff. Maybe I find ambient music today too predictable, but probably not because it actually is – mostly because it isn't what I crave."

Most annoying ambient cliche?

Marta Salogni: "The most ridiculous cliches are that ambient music might lack composition, structure or melody, and that it is music that often exists 'in the background', but that could not be further from the truth. Ambient music can be profoundly radical, all-enveloping, potent, and hardly fits into the rules we often like to box it in."

Lawrence English: "An assumption that ambient music's enemy is noise. They are comrades."

Wolfgang Voigt: "Muzak. Furniture shops. Floatation tanks. Music for airports..."

KMRU: "The soothing nature and 'wellbeing' of ambient music and reverbs. There's lots of good ambient music which isn't exploratory [enough], as it lingers in the cliche of what ambient music is or should be."

Marta De Pascalis: "Confusing any beatless music with ambient is something I find super-annoying. I don't like to label my music as ambient, as I think it's very reductive. Some tracks are certainly ambient, but most of them are more experimental, electronic."

Alex Paterson: "Who killed ambient noises?"

What should you never hear on an ambient record? We're thinking whale sounds…

Lawrence English: "But cetaceans are so great! Perhaps uncalculated dynamism?"

KMRU: "Long, shimmery, decaying reverbs."

Phew: "The sound of waves or running water. It's simply a matter of taste, but I feel less uncomfortable if I hear concrete sounds."

Wolfgang Voigt: "Ambient is resilient and open. There are no rules for ambient music, except that it regulates itself."

Marta Salogni: "I'm not the kind of person who likes limitations in music, so whatever inspires and is meaningful to the artist and audience can and should be used freely without fear."

A**lex Paterson:** "Thrash metal and nasty, deep feedback."

Marta De Pascalis: "I don't really feel like I would veto anything. With technology, we can process any sound – even a whale sound – over and over, transform it into something completely unrecognisable, and make an ambient track with it. Sound-wise, I like to be surprised, although I'm more of a synth-obsessed purist."

In these anxious times, what is the role of ambient music?

KMRU: "Maybe a reflection on what's happening, and opening new ways of thinking… allowing discomfort in the sublime."

Wolfgang Voigt: "For me, ambient is not just the soundtrack of consolation against the stupidity of the world. Ambient has no role and no obligation."

Alex Paterson: "Chill, drop in and flop out, sisters and brothers."

Marta Salogni: "Kafka said that 'a book must be the axe for the frozen sea within us'. I like to think the same about ambient music."

Lawrence English: "All music serves a vital role for those making and those listening. I think there's a danger in reducing work to 'functionalism', which perhaps is something that's haunting ambient right now. Culturally, reductive reads of work are rarely of value – it's for us to push at the boundaries of the practice, to open and deepen it further."

Marta De Pascalis: "I guess quite a lot of people use ambient for relaxation and meditation – I use it myself for yoga home sessions. But as a remedy for anxiety, I personally find more relief in going to see a great punk band – that's more the kind of music energy that puts me at peace."

Phew: "In a world of dichotomies, something as ambiguous as ambient music, which cannot be clearly categorised, is essential – even if it plays no role."

Where do you see ambient music going in the future?

Adam Wiltzie: "Normally, my response to this question is that what I create is so nuanced, it would be almost impossible to recreate, especially in terms of recording processes and textures and sounds. But with AI, I am not so sure anymore. To thicken the plot, on Stars Of The Lid's Spotify page there are new recordings posted at least two or three times a year. The music is not SOTL and does not sound like SOTL, but I'm not sure others seem to care. A colleague has claimed this is some sort of AI created by Spotify, posting new releases on random artist accounts that have tens of millions of streams, so as to create more revenue for the company."

Alex Paterson: "Way past our lifetimes and into the 23rd century."

Wolfgang Voigt: "Here."

Marta Salogni: "As we widen our experiences, the music we will make will reflect that. We will write and record new landscapes, and invent new sounds that can paint even more complex compositions."

KMRU: "I feel there'll be an amalgamation of all sorts of styles."

Marta De Pascalis: "Given ambient's contemplative nature, it is possible that it takes a fully functional turn in the direction of 'empty formalism', to quote the title of Brian Eno's 2018 installation, that I saw in Berlin. Something that aims to facilitate individual experiences rather than embodying them. But maybe it has always been like that."

Phew: "Ambient music should not have any direction – it should remain ambiguous and incomplete."

Lawrence English: "I truly hope its orbit drifts farther and farther away from the centre. The fringes hold the key to fulfilment."

FREE RADICAL

Always striving to challenge the status quo, Swedish enigma and visionary Karin Dreijer does things very much on their own terms, artistically and musically. Here, they open up on electropop experimentation, identity politics and the "visceral confection" that is Fever Ray

WORDS: SIÂN PATTENDEN
PICTURES: NINA ANDERSSON

"I think all of my characters are beautiful because they are true. They are very, very true. A lot of them have no shame. We have different names for the woman in the 'Even It Out' video – the Mona Lisa and Melody are just two. She has no shame at all, which is amazing and it's so fun to be in that character."

For someone whose artistic and musical life is theatrical, raw and boundary-breaking – treading the line between beauty and brutality, the parochial and the epic – Karin Dreijer (Fever Ray) is surprisingly considered. Dreijer is talking about taking on different roles in videos and on stage, and here the "Mona Lisa" of the previously mentioned 'Even It Out' video. A vengeful cypher of ostentatious female sexuality in brunette beehive, platform heels, stockings and Fanny Craddock make-up, she is a sight to behold.

"I had never dragged a female person before," admits Dreijer. "It makes you feel really strong. I don't understand what happens – I haven't been that character more than a few times."

Dreijer is sitting in a hotel room in Seattle, the day after the last show on the US leg of Fever Ray's tour. Tomorrow, the band and crew are off to Mexico City.

"Last night was fun," declares Dreijer, dressed in a sweatshirt and sporting a blonde pixie crop – a world away from their artistic persona. "When you start a tour, you don't yet know if you still can do it. It takes you a while to get it into the muscle memory, to understand what you're doing and what it is you *want* to do. It's a process. A year ago, I had no idea what it would be like when we started, no idea about what kind of character it would be and how it would feel in the body."

The European tour comes to the UK in late February and early March, with dates in Bristol, Manchester and London. It's taken over a year of pre-planning, but the show is still evolving.

"We sit down and go through choreography and listen to the audio after almost every show," says Dreijer. "We're five people onstage, we have movement and costumes, instruments, lights and audio. There's no school to learn how to do this, so I've learned by experience. Our show has a very big theatrical element and approach. Everything is performance."

What makes the tour even more extraordinary are the personnel. The band and the crew are female and non-binary.

"I think it's important to work with people that I feel safe around, who are professional," says Dreijer. "Yes, the crew that we have at the moment is mostly female and non-binaries, but the representation of us is not good in the industry. When you look at the line-ups at festivals and if you go backstage, it's awful. It's really, really bad."

You'd be forgiven for thinking that things might be different by now, especially in the broader arts environment, but no.

"I started 30 years ago and it hasn't changed much," muses Dreijer. "You do see some female and non-binary crew members, but they're not easy to find and the good ones are booked up many, many years ahead. But I try. The crew we had in the US were amazing and we had a lot of fun together. And we usually go by bus also, so you have to live with these people in close proximity."

Why does the music industry still seem so male-dominated? Is it not drawing enough people in, from all backgrounds? Dreijer's response is wonderfully blunt.

"It's patriarchy and capitalism – it's not different from any other industry."

Dreijer talks about the cost of touring post-pandemic and the effect of huge inflation. Taking a band on the road costs many times what it used to, and the UK is now very expensive to tour for international acts. Making art, in whatever form, is not easy.

"In Sweden, at least, there have been no political campaigns to restore culture since the pandemic," says Dreijer. "Maybe 10, 20 years ago you could apply for funding to tour but there is no such money anymore."

Musically, Fever Ray are in a league of their own. Released in March 2023, their third album, ‘Radical Romantics’, blends elements of electropop, lyrical magical realism, club culture, melodic hooks and huge technical experimentation.

Dreijer has a visionary approach to character and concept, the ambition being a holistic creation and, needless to say, the whole being much, much greater than the sum of its parts – both sensual and matter-of-fact, fusing graphic imagery with tenderness and a careful poetry. You can cite Björk or Sophie or a myriad of others, but nothing comes close to the concoction and visceral confection that is Fever Ray.

The videos are short films in their own right, featuring quasi-incubators, rabid tea parties, demented candy-coloured cabaret, sunken-eyed voyeurs, pickaxes, office photocopiers and delighted severed heads. They are works of art, and so it’s no surprise to learn that Dreijer takes their time when conceiving, writing and recording new material. After 2017’s ‘Plunge’, ‘Radical Romantics’ took five years to make. Did that seem like a long time?

“No, I think it was quite fast!” shoots back Dreijer. “I came home from the previous tour and it took me a year after that to just fix things, store things, organise things, do the accounting and take care of things like you do when you come home. But then I start to read and listen to music to find out how I want to do this, how I want to tell these stories. It’s a lot of research for me… and also to find collaborators.”

Nine Inch Nails’ Trent Reznor is one. He co-produced the sizzling, multisensory ‘Even It Out’ alongside Atticus Ross. How did that come about?

“They make a lot of music together for film and TV, and I was really into ‘Watchmen’, the series taken from the Alan Moore comics. I loved what they did. We started with one track that I had done a demo for, and I just thought it would be fun if they could put it in that kind of atmosphere. And they were up for it.”

And yet Dreijer has not yet met the pair in person.

“With all my collaborators, we do everything online,” they admit. “We send files back and forth – I love that way of working because then I can work any time of day that I like and they can do that as well.”

Is there a massive irony here, in that this is an album about connection – *visceral connection* – and yet you’re actually doing things remotely?

“Yeah, it’s a bit weird, but the social part happens when you tour,” they reason. “And no collaborators are involved in the lyrics – the collaboration is about the production.”

Dreijer also works with their younger brother Olof – the two previously worked together as electronic duo The Knife, wearing beaky masks in photographs and generally being highly conceptual. Their music studios are next to each other’s in Stockholm.

“We didn’t really hang out when we were young – I thought he was just a kid and annoying,” reveals Dreijer. “I moved out when I was 18 and we started to hang out and do things together much later. I ask him a lot about technical stuff and he asks me more about overall creative decisions. We trust each other in many ways.”

Do you ever bicker?

“No, we are very direct with each other. I can come to the studio and if he’s put all his surfing gear in the whole place I’ll tell him and he’s like, ‘OK, I’ll remove it’. So it’s very calm.”

There are, it turns out, ideal opportunities for windsurfing around the Stockholm area. Suggestions that the Dreijer siblings make a surf album are met with a cute “maybe”.

We talk about the characters in Dreijer's work – the lyrics tell stories and the videos are populated, as mentioned earlier, with curious figures. The 'Radical Romantics' cover features Dreijer dressed as a bald-headed sprite in a pale suit. The make-up is eerie – as if a 'Doctor Who' villain has taken on the aesthetics and lifestyle of a reincarnated Albert Steptoe. Are there a lot of these entities trying to get out in their songs? Where do they come from?

"It's more about emotions," they say. "I try to find the right voice and character and who needs to tell this story. How do I tell this story in the best way and find out the sound of the voice? Should it be whispered or screamed? In a big room or a small one? Far away or very close?"

On visual concepts, Dreijer works with Martin Falck ("an old friend and long-term colleague"), who is a graphic designer, creative/music video director and writer.

"We have a very similar process and we share everything all the time – every image, every idea, every joke," he has said of his projects with Dreijer.

There is such a lack of vanity in the work, a real exploration of outward persona and inner feeling – something that Dreijer describes as "finding what the emotion looks like". They are trying to create a visual language that few would have the courage to do. In performance terms, it's not purely a matter of beauty versus ugliness. When I use those words, Dreijer baulks.

"I believe that we [as humans] perform every day. Either you perform like this or you perform more like the normative beauty standard of a beautiful person. Who is to decide if it's ugly or beautiful? It's about the inside, right? And I know it's a cliche, but I think all of my characters are beautiful."

The characters are astonishing and extraordinary, I say – very powerful images.

"Me and Martin, we'd been watching a lot of John Waters films – especially 'Female Trouble'," says Dreijer.

Lyrically, the album explores vulnerability and desire, focusing on the body and the senses. On 'Shiver', for example – "Killer skies / Thick thighs / Some girls will make you blush / Some girls will make you shiver". But the sacred is very much contrasted with the everyday, and certain words and phrases jump out. "Cinnamon bun in the oven / There's a fire in my hand" from 'What They Call Us' and the use of the word "cuddle" in 'Carbon Dioxide'. It's not something you hear often in song, and with Dreijer's inflection, it sounds astonishing.

Which lyrics are they most proud of on the album?

"What catches you in poetry… it's the things that feel good in your mouth. And also for me, since English is not my first language, it's always good to play with words. In 'New Utensils', there is this list of things that you want, or need, to survive – but also if you're going on a hike or camping. I like to jump from very specific themes to the very grand."

Dreijer mentioned writing in English. Have they ever written in Swedish, I enquire?

"Yes, when I was 15, and for a theatre piece a little while ago, but I'm thinking about doing it again," says Dreijer. "Is it easy for me to write and sing in English? No, it's never easy to write at all. I still like magic realism – do you say that in England? – because I do think that every day is magical. And to be able to do that in Swedish… I haven't tried."

And what do your daughters think of your music?

"They are 20 and 16 now. My oldest can laugh a lot about my lyrics and stuff that is a bit cringe. But to them, this is my work."

People may assume that identity politics is a modern phenomenon, but haven't ideas of sexuality, gender – and everything in between – been consistently explored within music and culture?

"Art is a place where you can play with ideas and it's always been going on, as you say – questioning and playing with the norms, including gender," agrees Dreijer. "When we started in The Knife more than 20 years ago, we worked with voice transforming. I didn't see it as gender politics at that time because I didn't have a vocabulary for that. Or I just felt that I wanted to find a voice that told the story in a clear way. It was super-intuitive.

"I still don't think about it – music should not be thought about so much. It should come from the body."

We also need to clear up a few things about Swedish music. Surely there is a wonderful history and lineage of Swedish music that accounts for more than Abba, Ace Of Bass and Roxette? Can Dreijer suggest anything that I should be listening to?

"Oh, maybe I should write you a list!" they offer. "There are a lot of fun, experimental, progressive rock things, but there's also electronic music in the past."

What was the last record you bought?

"Obongjayar, a Nigerian-UK artist. I really like him. I love Yves Tumor. They played in Stockholm when I was in the US, and I was like, 'Oh damn!'. I'm so annoyed about having missed that."

If I was to go out in Stockholm, where should I go? Are there good clubs or hangouts, or is there a scene?

"The culture politics of Stockholm is awful, I would say," says Dreijer. "There are no great venues and the people who buy housing in the city manage to close down everything because it's too noisy. It's difficult to go to shows and difficult to play in Stockholm because there are so few places."

So what's the biggest myth about the creative process?

"That you should sit and wait for things to happen," says Dreijer, without hesitation. "You should really have a routine for working. I think it's great to do office hours. And if you don't have ideas you should do different processes like practise instruments, study other people's music… it's like musical exercise."

Karin Dreijer is now itching to go. We've talked for over an hour. One final question – the biggie. What are we all here for? Without a second's thought comes the answer, resolute and clear.

"To take care of each other."

'Radical Romantics' is out now on Rabid. Fever Ray's UK tour begins in Bristol on 29 February

BACK IN THE SADDLE

Big-name DJ, go-to producer, award-winning soundtrack artist... David Holmes needs no introduction. And his first solo album for 15 years – the blistering, euphoric and exquisitely crafted 'Blind On A Galloping Horse' – is an absolute pearler

WORDS: JIM BUTLER
PICTURES: STEVE GULLICK

David Holmes is an avid note taker. Whenever he hears an expression, phrase or sentence that resonates, he writes it down. It can come from anywhere – a magazine article, the radio, a TV show, snatches of conversation caught when he's out and about. The words don't have to mean anything at first, they just have to strike a chord.

"You write it down for a reason," explains the genial 54-year-old producer, composer and DJ from his studio bunker in his native Belfast. "You don't know what that reason is, but you write it down because it speaks to you in some way. And then once you've got thousands of those you can go back in and start playing with them. Then you start to form sentences, and before you know it you've written two verses and a chorus. And then you go, 'Ah, *that's* what I'm writing about'."

These stumbled-upon words and overheard turns of phrase lie at the heart of Holmes' magnificent new album – his fifth, and his first in 15 years – 'Blind On A Galloping Horse'. A stunning combination of emotive electronic body music – "I knew I wanted to make an album that had more energy, but I didn't know what it was about, so I never got round to doing it" – and a scabrous broadside against many of the world's current manifold ills, this righteous rebel-music has been warmly received across the musical spectrum for providing a dose of the good medicine many of us need right now.

"People have really embraced it," he beams infectiously. "Which is really all that you can hope for in this day and age. I'm actually surprised people can afford to buy records, they're so bloody expensive. And the whole world is in such a horrible place. But it feels like people have responded to it, which is great. It makes it all worthwhile. As much as we say, 'We don't care', it's good when you touch a nerve."

Since Brexit, Holmes' note taking has bordered on the voracious. One of the closing tracks on 'Blind On A Galloping Horse', a wonderfully evocative piece of krautrock-meets-electronic dreampop titled 'Tyranny Of The Talentless', was named after he heard someone use the phrase on the radio.

"I think it was the James O'Brien show," he recalls. "They were discussing the downfall of the British government, and I thought, 'I'm having that'."

Holmes says he's always been conceptual, and while he doesn't set out to make conceptual albums, he readily admits that he likes to tell a story. His first two albums, 1995's 'This Film's Crap Let's Slash The Seats' and its follow-up two years later, 'Let's Get Killed', have often been described as soundtracks to imaginary films, such was the vogue at the time. In 1998, he began a fruitful creative relationship with director Steven Soderbergh, scoring the acclaimed soundtrack for 'Out Of Sight' and going on to work on the filmmaker's 'Ocean's' trilogy.

"I like seeing a narrative and watching it form. Sometimes you don't know what that narrative is until you're into it – like this album. 'The Holy Pictures' [an atmospheric meditation upon his parents' deaths] was the same. The lyrics on this record are all the stuff I'd written down, and then I took it and shaped it into a song."

Holmes' ongoing battle with his own mental health is another bedrock of the album. He's naturally obsessive – "75 per cent of my obsession is brilliant, but the other 25 can be really destructive… you go to some really dark places" – and during the pandemic faced his demons head-on. Alongside the "psychedelic therapy" of imbibing magic mushrooms, the natural pause of the lockdowns allowed him to reset.

"After addressing that, it really was like a reawakening," he says. "There was a calmness with it as well. I was always quite an intense person, and having cleared that fog I was able to take a breath. The rest of the album is about what I saw when I got through that."

Holmes' candid approach to his struggles has won him plenty of admirers. He's received lots of messages from fellow sufferers – particularly men – thanking him for speaking up with honesty and authenticity.

"For whatever reason, men don't feel comfortable talking about it. But actually, the minute you start talking you realise that everybody is suffering from it. And I'm really enjoying that because I know I'm helping people. That's the best feeling in the world."

As the fog was lifting and Holmes began to "pay attention to where I was getting my news from", he started working on the soundtrack to 'This England', Michael Winterbottom's coruscating account of the government's (and specifically Boris Johnson's) handling of the early days of the Covid crisis. It was more fuel to his fire.

"'This England' was a bit too soon for a lot of people," he muses. "I think it's a great piece and I loved being part of it, but I was working on that during the second wave of Covid, so it was still very much happening. It made me really angry, but my mind was clear to get angry."

What follows is a quick-fire verbal fusillade of excoriating establishment take-downs. Michelle Mone and her £10 million yacht, the vast sums spent on the Test and Trace debacle and the dodgy PPE contracts – they all get short shrift from Holmes, but his most righteous invective is saved for those occupying the highest seats of power.

"Anyone who goes to Eton should not be allowed anywhere near Downing Street because they don't have any empathy," he sighs. "They've been in boarding school since they were eight. The whole trajectory of their education is based on never standing down, never giving in, never admitting that you're wrong. And on top of that you've got this privilege and entitlement."

He pauses for a second, takes a breath, and then continues…

"When you look at Boris Johnson's life as a human being, I mean, it's obvious that he didn't become a politician to help people. Boris Johnson didn't give a flying fuck about the rest of his cabinet, never mind us. So why did he get into politics? He probably knew enough to know that if he got into power he could do whatever the fuck he wanted.

"And I think there's an element of that in a lot of them. I'm not saying they're all like that. But it's kind of extraordinary, once they are exposed to crazy levels of corruption… honestly, you couldn't make it up. At least Dick Turpin wore a mask, as they say. So all that stuff really got into my brain."

Unsurprisingly, 'Blind On A Galloping Horse' is a protest album and, unlike some artists, Holmes has no issue with it being described as such. However, what it isn't is hectoring, belligerent or unilateral. It's an album couched in passion, heart and a collective zeal – indeed, one of its working titles was 'Only Love Can Save Us'. This compassion is evident in the music. While the lyrics often deal in existential dread (granted, the lyrical roll call of iconoclasts that comprise 'Necessary Genius' such as Terry Hall, Angela Davis, Tony Wilson and Nina Simone is suitably inspiring), the sounds are joyous. This was no accident.

"If you listen to a lot of protest albums from the 60s and 70s, listen to 'What's Going On' by Marvin Gaye – if you're not really deep into the lyrics it's actually a really warm positive record. So 'Blind' takes these sometimes really negative issues and puts a real heart behind them. It's like soul music. They're singing about heartbreak and devastation, but there are these big symphonies that make you feel great."

In any case, Holmes says he doesn't have the stomach to be permanently angry – "That would drive me a bit insane" – but he does think it's "OK to feel good about protesting".

"It's more about waking up," he explains. "It's more of a call to arms, metaphorically speaking. Paying attention. Being aware. There is light at the end of the tunnel, because if we didn't have hope we'd be in a pretty bad place. It would be a never-ending spiral of doom. And I wasn't in that place. I was more about 'we're all in this together'. We're also all alone in this together. So, it's about focusing on yourself, but also acknowledging the 'we' rather than the 'me'."

Two musical luminaries who are also namechecked in 'Necessary Genius' loom large over 'Blind On A Galloping Horse' – Andrew Weatherall and Sinéad O'Connor. Weatherall and Holmes go way back. On a visit over to England to see Weatherall DJ in 1990, Holmes persuaded the ever-shifting musical stalwart to come and play his club Sugar Sweet in Belfast. Weatherall also provided Holmes with one of his most enduring productions – his remix of The Sabres Of Paradise's 'Smokebelch II' in 1993. Their friendship remained strong until Weatherall's untimely passing.

"I'd say he's pretty present," says Holmes. "And the reason why he's pretty present is I think music was just something Andrew did. DJing was just something he did. He did it incredibly well. He was one of the greatest, if not the greatest, DJ I ever heard – for my tastes and for how he concocted his sets, and for his trajectory as a producer. But that's just something he did.

"Andrew was much bigger than that. He was a very inspiring man in other ways that have nothing to do with music. His generosity of spirit, that's something I've tried to learn. To look after the young ones, help them out, give them advice, do some work for fuck-all to help people."

RAVEN VIOLET AND DAVID HOLMES

O'Connor, he admits, was a "different animal". Before her death, Holmes had worked with the embattled singer on a new album, 'No Veteran Dies Alone'. The album will be released this year, and while Holmes isn't talking about the music out of respect for O'Connor's family, he happily describes the experience as something he'll never forget.

"I feel really blessed," he smiles. "It felt like I was recording Nina Simone or someone like that. I mean, there are stars – people who are amazing – and then there's that other tier: Nina Simone, Sly Stone, John Lennon, Sinéad O'Connor, Kurt Cobain, Bob Dylan… she's in that echelon, but just so brilliantly down to earth and funny. I've got a lot of really good memories."

As for her mention in 'Necessary Genius', O'Connor approved. Holmes sent her a message with the song and lyrics written out in full. She replied with "a wee smiley face" and then asked how his daughter was.

"Sinéad taught me not to be afraid to speak up when there's stuff going down that I don't agree with. Like what's happening at the minute. Like what happened during Covid. I think it's important for me to be on the right side of history and not worry about superficial luxuries like being a DJ or whatever."

The final component of 'Blind On A Galloping Horse' comes in the form of the singer – and Holmes' goddaughter – Raven Violet. 'Blind' might be touted as a David Holmes solo album, but it's not really. The collaboration between Holmes and Violet (the daughter of Holmes' Unloved bandmates Jade Vincent and Keefus Ciancia) is pivotal to the record. In Holmes' vaults there's a version of the album with him singing all the songs. But after the pair collaborated on the single 'Love Is A Mystery' for Golden Lion Sounds, he got her in to sing on the tracks 'Hope Is The Last Thing To Die' and 'It's Over, If We Run Out Of Love'.

"These lyrics just sounded more powerful coming out of the mouth of this 20-something, young, fierce, intelligent woman, who's just nonchalant," he explains. "She became a real influence on me. I hate the word muse, but she was really inspiring to work with because it felt like when I was writing, I could always go straight to the Raven voice in my head."

Although his musical career has taken him all over the world, and granted him friendships and working relationships with A-list stars, the likes of which the teenage Holmes growing up in a Belfast ripped apart by the Troubles could never countenance, he knows how fortunate he is. There's a story Holmes is fond of recounting that demonstrates his musical obsession.

One evening in 1990, after promoting one of his early Belfast Art College acid house nights, he found himself back in his bedroom at his parents' house listening to Ennio Morricone's soundtrack to 'Once Upon A Time In America' and, fittingly, Sinéad O'Connor, when suddenly he began crying.

"I wasn't sad," he reflects. "You know that old-school 'overcome with emotion'? I was just thinking, I can't imagine not doing this. I mean, it can't get any better than this. It almost sent me into a panic. But I've always had that panic – it's a real working-class thing – the idea that you could lose everything, and that's definitely done me good over the years. That's why I still live in Belfast, because the most important thing, apart from my family and my close friends, is being in my studio in my own home and making stuff."

Such an attitude means that 30-odd years into his peripatetic sonic journey, David Holmes can honestly say that now is as good as it gets.

"I mean, I'm not happy about the world," he laments, before perking up again. "But I'm happy. Experience is a wonderful thing. I was always just deeply curious, you know, always wanted to do the impossible, and I had the brass neck to give it a go.

"I'm still going to school. Every day I'm still learning new stuff. I think the most encouraging thing is that I want to learn. What I know is nothing. I still have that mindset. And so I kind of feel that I've reached a point in my life where on the one hand I'm really happy, but on the other I feel like I'm only really getting going."

'Blind On A Galloping Horse' is out now on Heavenly

MAKING WAVES

As Universal Harmonies & Frequencies, Hieroglyphic Being and Jerzy Mączyński have delivered a soul-enriching electro-jazz record – a celestial fusion of synth, sax and mystical futurism

WORDS: OLI WARWICK

"I'm a moody bitch," says Jamal Moss, aka Hieroglyphic Being. "You've got to catch me at the right time of the season."

The "season" outside is textbook autumn as the rain lashes down in Bristol, but the renowned Chicago artist is thinking back to the summer, when he was paired with Polish saxophonist Jerzy Mączyński for a week of improvised studio sessions which have led to their new album, 'Tune IN'.

"They caught me at the right time of the season," continues Moss. "If they hadn't, I probably wouldn't have done it."

Fresh off the train for the first of two live dates in the UK, Mączyński and Moss appear somewhat thrown together by their collaboration, which they have named Universal Harmonies & Frequencies. Mączyński, casually attired with a beanie and a relaxed, affable demeanour, is the younger of the two. To him, the whole endeavour seems novel and exciting.

Moss cuts a more imposing figure, sporting an all-black, subtly cyberpunk look accentuated by fingerless leather gloves, his long dreads hanging down one side of his head. It's a presence which tracks with his past connection to Chicago's fabled industrial scene, and his bearing matches. He's warm and verbose, but equally blunt about his feelings towards any topic that crops up, partly due to the jet lag that creeps up on him throughout the interview.

"I'm gonna be honest – I'm 52 and numb as fuck to the whole process," he says about his memories of the sessions that led to 'Tune IN'. "It's like putting on socks, wiping your ass with toilet paper or having a good drink – it's just part of the process. It depends on the mood I'm in, and they got me when I was in a good mood."

"They were bringing you ginger shots every hour," laughs Mączyński.

"I was in Mariah Carey mode minus the blue M&Ms," quips Moss.

The sessions in question took place in June last year in a small studio in Volkshotel, Amsterdam. The idea had been sparked by Pieter Jansen, a Dutch promoter who'd released Mączyński's previous project on his Yeyeh label in 2021. That album, 'Sariani', found Mączyński working closely with his friend and fellow Polish jazz explorer Wacław Zimpel, indulging in the time and space afforded by the lockdown in Warsaw to expand his electronic music practice in line with his accomplished sax playing.

"I knew you before this, for sure," says Mączyński as he looks to Moss. "But I was a little bit surprised when Pieter came up with this whole idea. Before entering the studio, I didn't know what to expect, but then I realised that Jamal is like a jazz machine – a true improviser."

"These older jazz musicians I used to hang out with in the 90s said I was an idiot savant, because they went through all this training, but I never did," says Moss. "I still don't know chords or anything. I just go by feeling or intuition."

The sessions at Volkshotel ran for eight hours a day for five days straight, resulting in a wealth of material. Moss was keen to keep up the momentum and not stagnate on one idea for too long, so he would sketch out parts and arrangements and present them to Mączyński and attendant engineer Rein De Sauvage Nolting before jamming them out.

Mączyński admits his own focus was on raw sax playing and on catching the right melodies and rhythms in response to the ideas Moss was throwing up from his set-up of two iPads and a mixer. In the months following the sessions, Mączyński recorded overdubs and contra points with De Sauvage Nolting to extend his sax parts, and Moss returned to the studio as the album was moulded into shape from the component elements.

‘Tune IN’ is certainly a grandiose record that produces a whole range of mountainous peaks across 12 cuts. The opening title track alone glides from cascading sprites of sax and synth into an unexpected jerk of drum machine-driven, hi-tech jazz. The staggered beats are characteristic of Moss’ storied role as a box-jamming provocateur for nearly 30 years, but they don’t dominate the album. Instead, there’s a greater focus on melodies and atmospherics, the electronics in dialogue with Mączyński’s sax rather than fighting with it.

Don’t be misled, though – Moss’ renegade spirit still defines the album and there’s plenty of abrasion and dissonance, which was at times a learning curve for Mączyński.

“I was not happy with ‘Searching 4 Spirituality Without Religion’,” he admits, referring to the pumped-up penultimate track, which locks into a dramatic call-and-response formation between wild synth flashes and sax flurries. “I was not into this concept, this melody, in the studio, but Jamal pushed it, and I spent two weeks after that trying to figure out how to create some layers. And now we are talking about this track, which is fucking insane. You were right [laughs].”

On the likes of ‘The Fifth Science’, there’s barely a beat. Instead, the movement comes from motorik pulses of melodic parts, yet the music is as vivid and kinetic as anything Moss has done in the past. In collaboration with others, he has learned to temper his penchant for abrasive percussion, sometimes due to necessity. In 2015, he performed in Belgium with Sun Ra Arkestra alumni and celebrated sax players Marshall Allen and the late Danny Ray Thompson.

“I had to learn to dial the drums back with wind players,” says Moss. “I can’t always do what I normally do – I gotta find a compromise. I was watching Marshall and Danny when I played with them. I was doing drum-focused stuff, and even though I’d still be in float mode, they’re already winded out and I feel bad. These older cats sitting here trying to keep up with my drum patterns and stuff, and I’m like, ‘Oh, I’m an asshole’. So I just said, ‘Next time, I need to bring more melodic, airy stuff into it instead of the hard drums’.“

While Moss doesn’t need to tread so carefully around younger players like Mączyński or past associate Shabaka Hutchings, the compromise in the collaborative process allows his strength in melodic sequencing and synth-shaping to shine through. Beyond the album, this is also evident when the pair take their project on the road.

Tonight’s sold-out show at Strange Brew in Bristol is the second time they’ve performed live together, having made their public debut as UHF at Dekmantel Festival in Amsterdam last August. Given the improvised spirit in which ‘Tune IN’ was made, it would be strange to hear a note-for-note recreation of the album, which leaves the prospect of a live performance that’s tantalisingly unpredictable.

“We were just improving it,” says Moss about their Dekmantel show. “Because we started out doing improv, when we do shows it could get stagnant if we kept playing the same type of way.”

“When we made the album, we made the sound, or the approach,” adds Mączyński. “Jamal has some stems from the record, and I have the preset sounds I created to process my saxophone, so now we improvise together and it keeps the vibe of the record, somehow.”

“If you say so,” chuckles Moss. “Let’s see what happens tonight.”

Later that evening, Moss is sitting onstage arranging a few elements on his iPads before they get started, presumably so he and Mączyński have a jumping-off point for the performance. He introduces them on the mic, talks up the album and explains that the show won’t be entirely representative, rather a hint at what ‘Tune IN’ sounds like. Sure enough, the 50-minute set – a swirl of melodious ambience – feels like a perfect precursor to the record’s wild peaks and energetic pops of musicality. Cast in muted lighting and dry ice, it’s a sultry performance in which Mączyński’s sax provides much of the movement – sampling, looping and subtly processing his playing but never overwhelming Moss’ ambience.

“I like these tools,” says Mączyński. “I like that I can be on the stage with my computer and a bunch of effects, and really express myself. It’s amazing for me.”

While Mączyński spends a lot of time playing in bigger jazz ensembles, the appeal of electronic autonomy is evident in a collaboration like this, where there's space for his instrumentation to be taken in more innovative directions, and Moss certainly leaves plenty of room for that. Echoing his previous sentiments about backing off on percussion in these kinds of collaborations, it's only in the very last stretches of the performance that we hear a kick drum sneak into the mix, one described by my friend as "the saddest kick I've ever heard".

Melancholic though the performance might be, it's also very beautiful and uplifting. In the past, Moss' instinct for experimentation, informed by his love of industrial music and an idiosyncratic creative vision, has on occasion led to confrontational outcomes. When we touch on Singeli and the frenetic dance music coming out of East Africa in recent years, he tells me about an incident that occurred when he was playing in Berlin in the mid-2000s for the fabled Frankfurt minimal label Playhouse.

"My friend sent me some of this sound coming out of Africa everybody's geeking on," he says. "It's real fast and it's got this weird, off-kilter rhythm. I was making stuff like that around 2008, 2009 – even before that.

"I got banned from Berghain for playing that sound in 2004. I had no clue it was a label night for Playhouse, and I'm there just banging it out hardcore for an hour-and-a-half. I had 200 people in front of me as high as a kite, loving it. Everybody else was sitting down bulling me. [Label manager] Ata walked past and he didn't even speak to me. The manager said, 'Yeah, that was interesting. We'll call you'."

It's likely that Moss' firebrand drum frenzies would meet a more receptive audience 20 years later, but the goal of UHF is less oppositional. As the project name implies, there's a more spiritual impetus behind the music which extends to the track titles. It's not surprising to learn that these were chosen by Moss – the likes of 'Can U Hear The Hum' and 'The End Of Ur World' have a styling which is consistent with his past projects, but they're not actually his own words. Instead, Moss looked to the titles of inspiring books he's read, which he's now deployed as tasters for inquisitive listeners of the album to explore.

"I read a lot of books," he admits. "I just felt like, at a certain point in your life, you've got to put stuff out there that's going to help the world. I can have somebody listen to music that I create, on my own or with someone else, and then when they see the titles they might be curious, like, 'What are the titles about?'. Then when they find out it's a book, they can get it and 'tune in'. That's the best way I can put it."

Much like the debate over 'Searching 4 Spirituality Without Religion' being included, Jerzy Mączyński seems content to let Jamal Moss lead on matters of "framing" the project. 'Tune IN' certainly feels consistent with Moss' wider body of work, however reciprocal the partnership may be. As Mączyński tells me after their performance, he very much cherishes their surprise encounter.

"Meeting Jamal was very inspiring," he confirms. "I learned a lot."

For Moss, his tendency to play down the project is balanced by the sheer feeling of the music he puts into it. For someone with a long, winding and wholly singular path through life and art, a little jaded quip here or there is understandable, but he's also just being realistic about his work.

"When I'm talking, I'm either full of shit or just guessing, because I don't know," he says when I ask about how he thinks the album will be received. "When it comes out, we might win an award. It might get synced to a lot of films or compilations – I have no idea. It depends who it reaches, and how and when. I'll be at home with Uber Eats, watching cable television until the time comes for me to respond to whatever happens with this."

'Tune IN' is out now on Yeyeh

SWAMP THINGS

The new album by London synthpop quartet Bas Jan deftly combines the everyday and the esoteric. Examples? Fonts on British road signs and the tragic history of Irish witchcraft...

WORDS: BOB FISCHER
PICTURES: AURORA HORWOOD

"I don't want to celebrate the ordinary," says Serafina Steer. "But I have found making the record a way of being *seen* in my ordinariness. It's uplifting to be able to share those bits of humanity where you're not necessarily living your best life. You might be feeling utterly crap in a car park. But it's about trying to bring the joy."

She pauses for a second.

"No, that sounds like utter rubbish. I feel like I'm speaking another language!"

The new Bas Jan album, 'Back To The Swamp', is their third. And, I'd argue with mild-mannered stoicism, their best. It's 10am on a bone-chilling winter's morning, and precisely 75 per cent of the band have popped up on adjacent windows on my screen. It's like a synthpop 'Celebrity Squares'. I'm joined by founder and frontwoman Serafina Steer (who is erudite and thoughtful, despite her unnecessary apologies), violinist Charlie Stock and drummer Rachel Horwood. Only bassist and sax player Emma Smith is missing – she's in Mexico, playing live with Pulp. As excuses go, I've heard worse.

We're discussing the lead single from the album, 'At The Counter', and its accompanying video. Both are brilliant and encompass everything I love about Bas Jan. "Living my best life / I'm at the pet shop," sings Serafina to angular synthpop accompaniment, as the quartet descend, blank-faced, onto a retail park in Enfield. I assume they spent weeks obtaining permission from Pets At Home, and didn't just turn up to film guerilla-style?

"No, it *was* guerilla-style!" smiles Serafina.

"We were all worried we'd get chucked out," adds Charlie. "We ran in and said, 'We've got to be really quick – split up, and we'll meet round the back of the fish tanks!'."

"In the pet shop, they didn't care," says Rachel. "I bought something for my cat, and the woman was really chilled about it all. They weren't bothered in the toy shop, either. It was only in the supermarket that we thought, 'We'd better hurry up in here'."

"Didn't one of the staff say, 'She's wearing orange lipstick'?" asks Serafina.

"Yes, that was in Aldi!" laughs Rachel.

It all reminds me of Madness, I muse. While their 1980s contemporaries spent half a million quid on 'Mad Max' sci-fi sets and exotic yachting jollies, Madness just turned up to a school field in Kentish Town with their sax player on a wire. One of my favourite frames in the 'At The Counter' video, I say, is a lingering shot of a discarded Skips packet.

"I like stuff like that as well," says Rachel, who's also the video's director. "That's probably why I didn't pick the packet up. And it's funny you talking about Madness – I used to really like their videos. I had a tape of them when I was a teenager, so I guess that might have seeped in a little bit."

"The trumpet player on the album, Joe Auckland, plays with Madness," adds Serafina. "That's why he can't play at our launch. Oh look, Rachel's shrunk!"

This startling revelation feels a bit like the cliffhanger to a 1960s episode of 'Doctor Who', but blimey, Rachel *has* shrunk. No, hang on… her two-year-old daughter, sitting in on the conversation, has just grabbed her phone. We all wave hello to the pair of tiny eyes peeping above Rachel's kitchen table, and it begins to feel – rather splendidly – more like a relaxed coffee morning than an actual interview.

'Margaret Calvert Drives Out' is another stand-out track on the album. It's a touching homage to the designer of Britain's road signs, with lyrics by writer and performance artist Sally O'Reilly.

"I approached Sally and asked if she would like to collaborate, and she's always fecund with ideas," says Serafina. "She said, 'How about if I come up with 30 ideas for a song and you choose something you like?'. One was things overheard on a building site, another was the band members' favourite recipes. But then she suggested Margaret Calvert – and I hadn't heard of her."

It's wonderful, I tell them. A touching tribute to sans-serif fonts and the silhouetted cow on the "cattle likely to be in road ahead" sign. That's what I mean by celebrating the ordinary – Bas Jan are a dab hand at pointing out the everyday objects that have become *so* everyday, we barely notice them.

"Totally!" says Serafina. "That does make sense. I would really like to find an alter ego and write from that perspective. But I want to have some emotional sincerity in my stuff, too. Maybe it's just a lack of imagination…"

Still, while we're here, what *are* the band members' favourite recipes? They all enter into meditative deep thought.

"I've just cooked some amazing mushrooms that my friend picked," says Serafina. "I don't know what they were called, but they were really delicious."

"I like cauliflower cheese," says Charlie.

It's a good fallback, isn't it? A staple.

"No!" snaps Serafina. "It's contentious. A lot of people struggle with cauliflower cheese. It's divisive."

Formed in 2015 by classically trained harpist (and regular Jarvis Cocker collaborator) Serafina and Canadian artist Jenny Moore, the band's line-up was initially fluid, but now seems reassuringly settled. The name is a homage to Bas Jan Ader, a Dutch conceptual artist whose most celebrated work – 'I'm Too Sad To Tell You' – is a three-minute movie depicting him singularly failing to hold back tears. It's a genuinely affecting watch. Even more so when you discover that he was lost at sea in 1975, aged 32, attempting to cross the Atlantic on a 13-foot sailboat that was later discovered drifting off the coast of Ireland.

"I hope we're not going to end up like that," says Serafina, when I broach the subject.

Nevertheless, it's proof that the band's fascination with the mundane goes hand in hand with an interest in the decidedly more esoteric. 'Back To The Swamp' isn't all retail parks and road signs. 'Ding Dong' is about Alice Kyteler, a wealthy 14th century Irish woman accused of witchcraft. Fleeing the country, she left her servant Petronilla De Meath to take the rap and become the first woman in Ireland to be burned at the stake. 'Tarot Card', meanwhile, is concerned with slightly less perilous occult practices.

"I'm not a tarot reader," says Serafina. "That song came about because I was at a Christmas party, and a friend got out her tarot cards and read them for me and Emma. It was a quick one – three cards each, taking turns. I come from a slightly hippyish family, so I had quite a lot of that kind of thing when I was growing up. My mum used to read the 'I Ching', and my sister will often come up with a past-life explanation for something. I'm the straight one…"

"Serafina's sister also has insight into dream meanings," adds Charlie.

"My dad has kept a database of every dream that he's ever had since the mid-1980s," reveals Serafina, to gasps of astonishment all round. "And it cross-references, so if he has a dream about a black cat then he can check his database and find every other time that's happened."

"That's amazing!" says Charlie. "Sometimes I write my dreams down in the back of a book. Can I say this one? Or is it too stupid? I dreamed we were in the car, and Ben, our driver, was enthusiastically noting I had a Garfield hot-water bottle. Which is something I do take away with me, because I'm always cold. But then all these other hot-water bottles started appearing, and they were all slightly weird-looking Garfields with wonky eyes. So I was questioning their authenticity – 'That doesn't look like a proper one! What's going on?'."

She looks thoughtful for a second.

"Maybe it's to do with trust," she ponders.

"Or Ben's integrity," smiles Serafina.

Go on then, try this. The night before the interview, I tell them, I had this dream in which the night sky above my house somehow tore open to reveal a gleaming white laboratory complex hidden in the dimension beyond. When I entered, I found rooms of featureless grey entities being schooled in the art of behaving like humans – walking, eating, sleeping – and I realised, to my horror, that they were *us*. This was what all human beings had once been, before they'd entered this earthly realm to act out the facade of everyday life. I woke up in a cold sweat, consumed by the dreadful, all-pervading realisation that life was ultimately cynical and pointless.

All three band members look visibly shocked.

"I had a dream last night that my partner wanted to go for a run," says Rachel. "That was it. It's why I don't keep a dream diary. Mine are so dull."

The album has quite a melancholy feel, I suggest. There are ambient textures and mournful trumpets. Serafina seems slightly bemused at the suggestion.

"I actually feel a lot of it's more poppy and upbeat than the previous records," she says. "I guess 'Tarot Card' has Charlie's looped violin, so that's got more space but, I don't know, I don't find 'Ding Dong' or 'Over The Counter' melancholy. Maybe I'm wired differently."

No, it's probably just me. I see melancholy everywhere. 'Cried A River', though? That's surely a heartbreaker. "There's no going back / Cos I cried a river and the river ran deep."

"There are definitely struggles and sadness, but I was also hoping it was quite a strong and hopeful record," says Serafina. "That's what got us through making it, really – 'We're fucking going to do this!'. I don't know, I always sound sad. I *look* sad as well."

There are two songs on the album that I found particularly resonant. 'No More Swamp' seems to be a defiant roar against encroaching depression ("I don't have time to change my entire brain… no more swamp!") but 'Back To The Swamp' suggests the temptation to wallow in torpor is sometimes oddly alluring. "Missing the mud / The sinking feeling / That was our drug."

"I don't think it's about depression so much," explains Serafina. "More wanting to write about the stage of life I'm at in a way that's more honest. I'm not 25. It's about the puzzles and struggles of being 41 and having a kid and a family, and how things change. In the context of everything having to be fine – having to show up, and be responsible, and run lots of things. It was fun when I didn't have to do that."

I identified with one line in particular, though. "I'd been trying to place the blame / On things like diet and lack of sleep." I spent years looking to other factors for the causes of my low-level misery before realising it was probably just me. And I'm reconciled to that now, and better at dealing with it.

"I guess it's a reckoning when you realise, 'Alright, so I'm actually going to be me for quite a long time now'," she nods.

"Why does it take so *long*, though?" asks Charlie.

"It's a readjustment," continues Serafina. "I didn't get worried about turning 40 before I was 40, but afterwards it felt like a big deal. And maybe some things I thought I wanted, I realised I didn't want any more. My priorities shifted a bit."

So what does the future hold for Bas Jan? Plans for 2024?

"There will probably be a bit of a hiatus," begins Serafina. "Because Rachel…"

She pauses for dramatic effect.

"…is pregnant! REVEAL, REVEAL! So I guess we'll be having a break. Although we always say that if crazy offers come in, we'll consider them. So please put that in the feature."

Congratulations! When is the baby due?

"End of April," says Rachel. "I don't know, we might do a few gigs before then. The cut-off point is probably March. But I don't want to risk any big tours."

Blimey, yeah. The last thing you want is to go into labour backstage at Sneaky Pete's or The Cumberland Arms.

"There's often not even a backstage!" laughs Charlie. "Where'd you go then?"

"Behind the bar," deadpans Serafina.

With that, it's time to leave, but perhaps with a little renewed vigour – both to live our best lives and, indeed, to bring *exactly* that kind of joy to our everyday ordinariness.

'Back To The Swamp' is out now on Fire

FLOWERED UP

Colombian producer Montañera makes deeply hypnotic and emotive music that fully draws you into her sonic world – all rich, expansive electronic textures and warming ambient hues

WORDS: JEREMY ALLEN

When María Mónica Gutiérrez – also known as Montañera – moved to London to study for a master's degree in music in 2020, the timing was inauspicious to say the least. In her native Colombia, Gutiérrez had been an established artist for more than a decade. In England, she was coping with the hopes and fears of a stranger in a foreign land – making new friends, becoming familiar with new institutions and neighbourhoods and acclimatising to the weather – when along came Covid-19.

"I came here during the pandemic, so it was a bit challenging," she says understatedly. "I came to study, and then suddenly everything was online. I had a very lonely period for a while, which I guess we all did."

Given the widespread misery that was suffered by so many, she's keen not to overhype her own bad experience, although one can only imagine the bleakness of travelling 5,000 miles to end up in solitary confinement with no end in sight. Yet out of adversity came a radical new way to approach creativity, predicated largely on the limitations imposed on her.

"I had a Korg in my suitcase, so I just started exploring the synthesiser more than if I would have done in a normal situation," she says. "I'd become accustomed to playing with other musicians but now, because of lockdown, I was literally just in my room singing and exploring textures and sounds."

The outcome was Montañera's stunning third solo album, 'A Flor De Piel' – which loosely translates as 'Flowered Skin' – a sonic departure from what's come before, full of exotic soundscapes almost entirely devoid of beats. Much of the mood comes from a desire to self-soothe in lieu of any company.

"I started listening to a lot of ambient and experimental music, Indian ragas, trying not to be anxious or stressed," she says.

Gutiérrez has been writing melodies for the last 15 years, but out went the tried and tested songwriting conventions and in came the juxtaposition of her vocals against a monophonic voice. On a trip back to Bogota to do some shows, she met up with her old guitarist Diego Manrique, who is now one half of Colombian electronic duo Rizomagic with Edgar Marún.

"So I met with Diego to have a coffee and just hang, and he showed me what he was doing with Rizomagic," she says. "I really loved it, and I just intuitively thought that maybe these guys could be the ones to produce this new music, because I trust their musical tastes a lot."

The cut-up, boom-bap eccentricity of Rizomagic's 2021 debut album, 'Voltaje Raizal', has found much critical acclaim, and while their approach is very different on 'A Flor De Piel', the collaboration has produced something unique. Lush sounds are brought together to mingle from different corners of the Earth, giving rise to something altogether otherworldly.

The opening title track features Gutiérrez's shimmering vocal set against stark, slowly glissading sub-bass, with the forbidding landscape of the verses transforming into the sublime in the choruses, like light breaking through a window. There's a koto in the mix too, while on 'Me Suelto Al Riesgo', Gutiérrez plays the kora, which she studied in London under the tutorship of a Senegalese griot.

"I've become interested in Senegalese and African traditional music, and kora music is beautiful because it's so celestial and ethereal," she explains. "It wasn't a conscious decision. I was just into music that made me feel calm and elevated my mind."

Perhaps the pièce de résistance is 'Santa Mar', which Gutiérrez admits is one of the most special songs of her career so far. The only piece on the album with an overtly rhythmic track, it also features the marimba playing of Juan Carlos Mindinero (aka Cankita) alongside the traditional Colombian singers Las Cantadoras De Yerba Buena.

"The dissertation I did for my master's degree was called 'How can the singing practice be a tool for social healing and peacebuilding?'," Gutiérrez explains. "And the Las Cantadoras were the case study for my research."

Las Cantadoras are an all-female vocal group who live in an isolated village in the Chocó region on the Pacific coast of Colombia. They sing indigenous bullerengue music that has largely evaded the influence of globalisation.

"I went to their village and I gave them some workshops around what I had discovered in my research. We did some singing and as I'm also a yoga teacher, we did some breathing exercises. They were really happy with all of the research and they asked to make a song with me. They're such an inspiration, these women."

As luck would have it, Gutiérrez met up with the famous marimba player Cankita in London, and it transpired in conversation that some of the Cantadoras were, in fact, his aunts.

"So I invited him to record the marimba, and he became my bridge to these women because he's very close to them," she says. "They're elderly so some of them don't even have WhatsApp. Communication had been difficult up to that point so meeting Cankita was amazing."

Despite the gloom of lockdown, a sense of hope seems to permeate the record, although my inability to speak Spanish means I can't be entirely certain.

"In interviews, I've been repeating the part about being in a foreign country and how challenging it is," Gutiérrez admits. "But there's definitely a counter-story as well that I haven't talked about as much, of how this music brought me such relief.

"With Rizomagic, I was very clear that I didn't want the album to become too dense, but then again I didn't want it to be just airy and light, either. I wanted both things to be very present, where some tracks have very deep bass but then my voice is super-ethereal on top."

We live in an increasingly binary world where we are constantly encouraged to be one thing or the other, but as Gutiérrez explains, life sometimes isn't quite so clear-cut as that.

"I wanted that tension of having something very light and something very dark, because that was actually the experience I was having," she says. "The two were constantly there, which is contradictory, I guess. But to be honest, I was feeling both of those things at the same time."

'A Flor De Piel' is out now on Western Vinyl

RUB OF THE GREEN

Using data gathered from plants and fungi, Alex H Duncan creates unique, “non-human” sounds and melodies. It’s intoxicating stuff

WORDS: ISAAK LEWIS-SMITH
PICTURES: PAUL WILKINSON

“Listen to this,” says Alex H Duncan, attaching a crocodile clip to a nearby fern, as a noise sounding like barbed wire being spun through a meat grinder fills his studio. “All living things have electrical activity in them. That sound is the plant moving cells and water about. It’s picking up on electrical currents moving through the plant, into the soil and back up through this other leaf again. Hold on, that’s a bit crap…”

He furrows his brow, flicks a switch and twists a knob.

“Ah, that’s much less silly,” he sighs. “This plant is now photosynthesising and transpiring and will carry on doing this for hours. If you kill or hurt it, the MIDI notes will go up. Then as it calms down it will start to do this. It’s influenced by so many things – storms, being watered, if I set fire to it…”

He stops mid-sentence and pauses.

“If I have to do something to a plant, it’s only if there is a *very* good reason.”

Since 2018, when he discovered PlantWave – an ingenious palm-sized “bio-sonification” device which measures the electrical conductivity of a plant and translates the data – Alex has not been short on inspiration in his quest to uncover the sounds of the natural world.

It’s certainly a change of pace from his previous work with guitar-based trio Assassins Of Sound. A day in the life of Alex H Duncan might now involve frolicking around centuries-old flora in one of England’s ancient woodlands, hooking up sensors to miles-long mycelial networks underfoot, or analysing how trees respond to anything from gong baths to the sounds of thousands of rubber wellies at Glastonbury Festival.

Meeting up with Alex in his utterly idyllic Candyland Studio – a self-built, wood-cabin recording hideaway in one of Devon’s last remaining temperate rainforests – it’s immediately clear that a big part of the thrill is in the unique surprises his flowery friends offer up.

“We often fall into the trap of having all of these amazing tools that can imitate a Marshall stack from 1967, but that can stifle creativity, because we’re just simulating things that have already happened,” says Alex, as he absent-mindedly picks up a guitar and strums. “When collecting biodata from a different organism, and using that to go on a musical journey, it’s hard to get caught in a trap of thinking, ‘Oh, that plant sounds like Radiohead, or that one sounds like Madonna’.”

His ongoing ‘Plant Medicine’ series is a case in point. These 40-minute instrumental “mantras”, which Alex has been posting every couple of months since June 2023, present bewitching tangles of ambient underworlds that refuse to be neatly boxed. Above all else, these ever-shifting compositions showcase his side mission – to portray our natural world with authenticity.

“In nature, things kill each other,” he says. “Things rot. Nature is mud, it’s *earthy* – not an image of a fluffy unicorn dancing on some pink grass. That’s a New Age perception. If you look at patterns in the trees, they can be mathematically incredible and also dangerous, and I try to make music

that follows those patterns to make us less scared of it. If our children are going to have a future, we need to trust the fungus and mycelium to crack on. 'Cos we're fucking useless. But they're amazing."

At its most profound, Alex's music succeeds in peeling away the dividing layers between humans and nature, as shown by his stunning 2022 album, 'Subcubensis', for which he had the daring idea to record a cluster of magic mushrooms he found growing on his father's grave.

The music is a textured drone which rustles forebodingly, and given that Alex describes it as "a paean to my father, considering his very nutrients and molecules were growing in those mushrooms", the underlying theme is one of *decomposition* – a word that takes on extra meaning when you understand his blueprint for making plant music.

"If you're listening to something that's been made by another organism, and you start to learn what that musical event is, then you need to have respect and reverence for the musical structure that's being created," he explains. "And more and more, I think it's about becoming part of a conversation. I've got to listen to whatever that plant's done, and if I then add human sections to it, it's got to be because that makes it easier for humans to listen to it. As soon as you get *too* human about it, it all falls apart."

This issue of authorship has been of particular concern to Alex on his new album, 'The Path'. Released on ethical label Irregular Patterns, its seven tracks see him getting more hands-on than ever before.

"When I did 'Subcubensis', I was saying, 'This is data from magic mushrooms – go and listen to it'. That kind of approach probably went back to when I had a creative breakdown. Then I discovered I could make music using plants, which was brilliant, because I wasn't responsible for the musical structures at all! I was simply facilitating whatever the mushroom or plant 'said'. Now I've had a modicum of success, it's given me a bit more confidence to think my ideas aren't utterly stupid, and what I've tried to do with 'The Path' is put a lot more of myself into it. It might even have some sense of rhythm!"

Full of raging sound storms that hold about as much violence as a wormhole turning in on itself, the album speaks to the age of climate breakdown we desperately find ourselves in, and how recording a humble maple tree, for instance, could become a small act of resistance. Alex is careful not come across as an evangelist, and he believes you can't force people to change. But you also can't ignore his wide-eyed enthusiasm for the power of nature. So, I wonder, has making plant music changed him at all?

"I'm fundamentally different," he asserts. "Letting music lead you, educate you and change the way you think is very good for the brain. I'm now a more patient person – I can wait for things. I think the more unhappy and stressed you become, the more you consume, so I'm trying to get everyone to slow down. But I can't lie – it's taken me a long time to get here."

'The Path' is out now on Irregular Patterns

ABOUT-TURN

LOULA YORKE

Volta

TRUXALIS

In classical poetry, volta refers to a critical turning point in the verse, usually marking a change in what the poet is thinking and expressing to the reader. Shakespeare made liberal use of voltas in his sonnets, deploying them as literary left turns that entirely alter the focus of his observations, just at the very point where you had the subject of his longing more or less figured out.

That's how you should approach 'Volta', the fourth album from Oram Award-winner Loula Yorke. It represents a sudden, but remarkable, change in direction for the Suffolk-based modular musician – a stylistic pivot, a shift of focus, a turning point.

After moving to the area in 2009, Yorke was inspired to make the live rave fare that she had been drawn to during a chaotic spell in London, but felt dispirited by the notion of creating music by pushing blocks of sounds around on a computer screen. It somehow seemed the yawnsome antithesis of the energy she wanted to express.

For Yorke, the only logical solution was live improvisation using a modular rig, initially as TR-33N with her partner Dave Stitch. That spontaneous approach also characterised her first three solo albums after TR-33N was put on hold. 'LDOLS' (2019), 'ysmysmysm' (2019) and 'Florescence' (2022) were all structured from improvised experiments, and Yorke was rightly heralded as a pioneering innovator in the sprawling, tangled modular scene.

'Volta' is different. It is consciously and carefully composed. Reassuringly, though, her modular system is still very much at the heart of this collection. It's not like Yorke has suddenly discovered inspiration in the computer-based approach that she found so off-putting in the first place. Instead she has reached a sense of peace with the notion of programming her synths. It represents an interesting experiment. What if, by eschewing improvisation in favour of a more compositional approach, the very essence of what makes Yorke's music so special is removed? Happily, there is no risk of that happening here.

Containing seven long pieces, each of these tracks is characterised by rich, overlapping sequences which, while programmed, feel like they are still given the space to evolve along their own pathways. Whereas the Yorke of 'LDOLS' would want ideas to arrive, flourish and be rapidly replaced, on the likes of 'The Grounds Are Changing As They Promise To Do' there is a sense of an unhurried unfolding. A core sequence will develop, new interventions will arrive, become entwined, and grow together.

With 'The Grounds Are Changing', I found myself trying to follow each layer, like one of those newspaper puzzles where you attempt to work out which line will reach a specific destination – a futile exercise, as I continually lose the path, usually within seconds. That's not because these tracks are confusing or unstructured, but because they are so utterly absorbing.

'Staying With The Trouble' is one of the best moments. It contains a central, spiralling, endlessly shifting melody which acts as a consistent anchor while everything else evolves around it. But it also stands apart for its pace. Most of the other tracks that Yorke presents are delivered at a meditative, contemplative speed. 'Staying With The Trouble' moves and changes much more rapidly, with double-speed, countermelodic additions attaching themselves to the core refrain and acting as accelerants. These high-velocity collisions could, on one level, feel like a throwback to Yorke's early rave music experiments, full of thrilling, pulse-quickening energy.

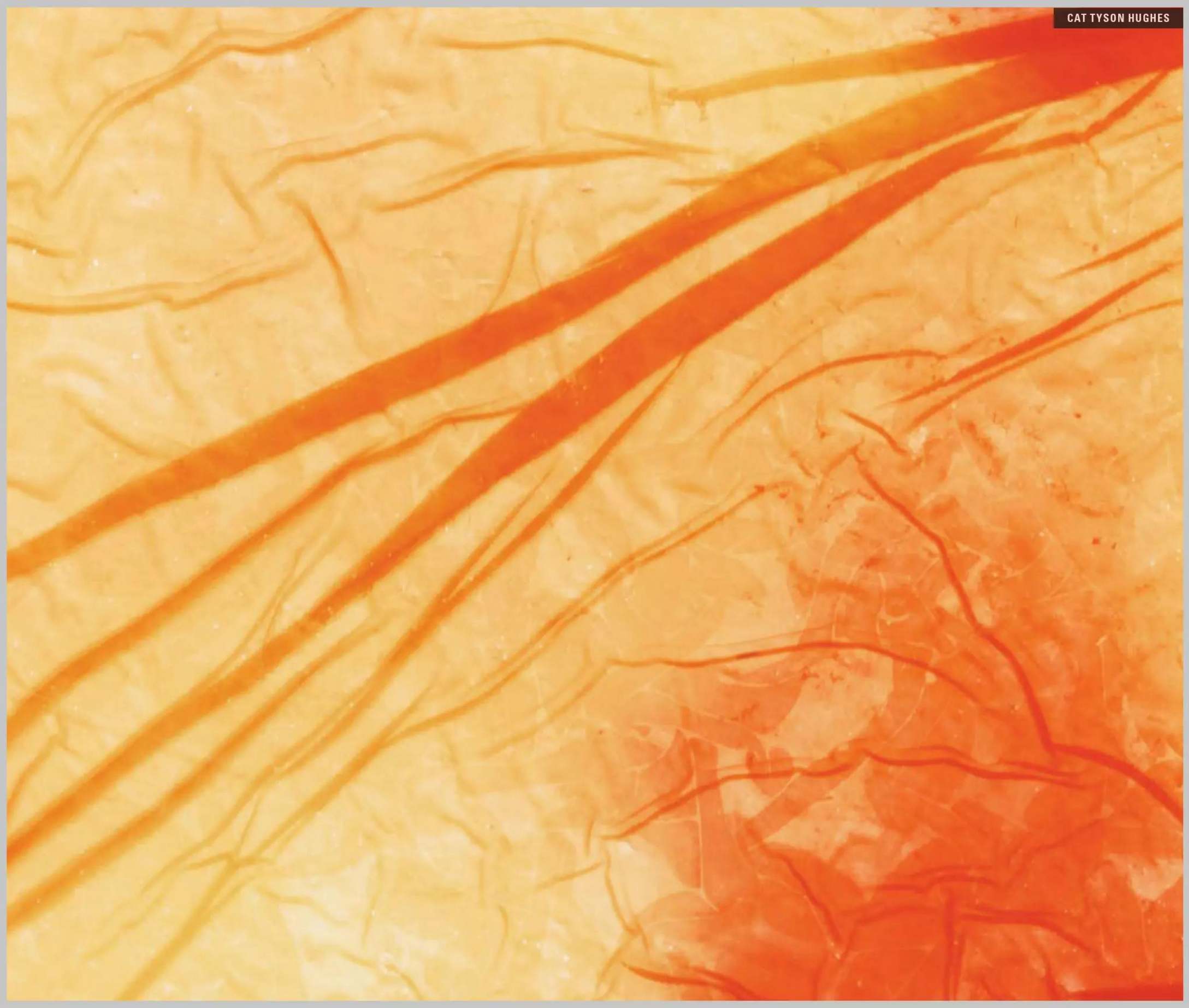
Another highlight comes in the form of 'An Example Of Periodic Time', which again operates at a faster tempo. There's something wonderfully antediluvian about this piece. Its rapid oscillations feel fully connected to some of the earliest 1960s or 1970s modular experiments, occupying a zone that is both playful and filled with a perpetual, wide-eyed awe of the sounds being created.

Therein lies the beauty and significance of 'Volta'. It finds an artist completely comfortable throwing all of their usual processes out of the window, entirely at ease with learning new techniques, no matter how challenging they may be.

I can imagine Yorke not in her Suffolk home with a modular rig, but standing at the dead centre of an early electronic music studio, surrounded by tape machines and oscillators, her head cocked to one side listening to sounds bouncing around the space. Showcasing a fearless experimenter at work, 'Volta' is a milestone moment in Yorke's career.

MAT SMITH

LOULA YORKE
VOLTA



CAT TYSON HUGHES
Roses In The Casement Window
QUIET DETAILS

"Having the chance to live the simplest childhood dreams as an adult." This is the inspiration behind this soothing ambient collection from an Australian composer whose formative years, one assumes, were spent in bucolic stillness. The title track mixes distant birdsong with softly breathing drones, and 'Another Daylight' adds layers of wordless, ethereal vocals from both Hughes and LA producer Cynthia "Marine Eyes" Bernard. An album for anyone who ever drew pictures in the air with their fingers, as the clock on the mantelpiece ticked away a silent Tuesday afternoon. **BF**

DAU
Gilly's Wood
SPIRITUALS

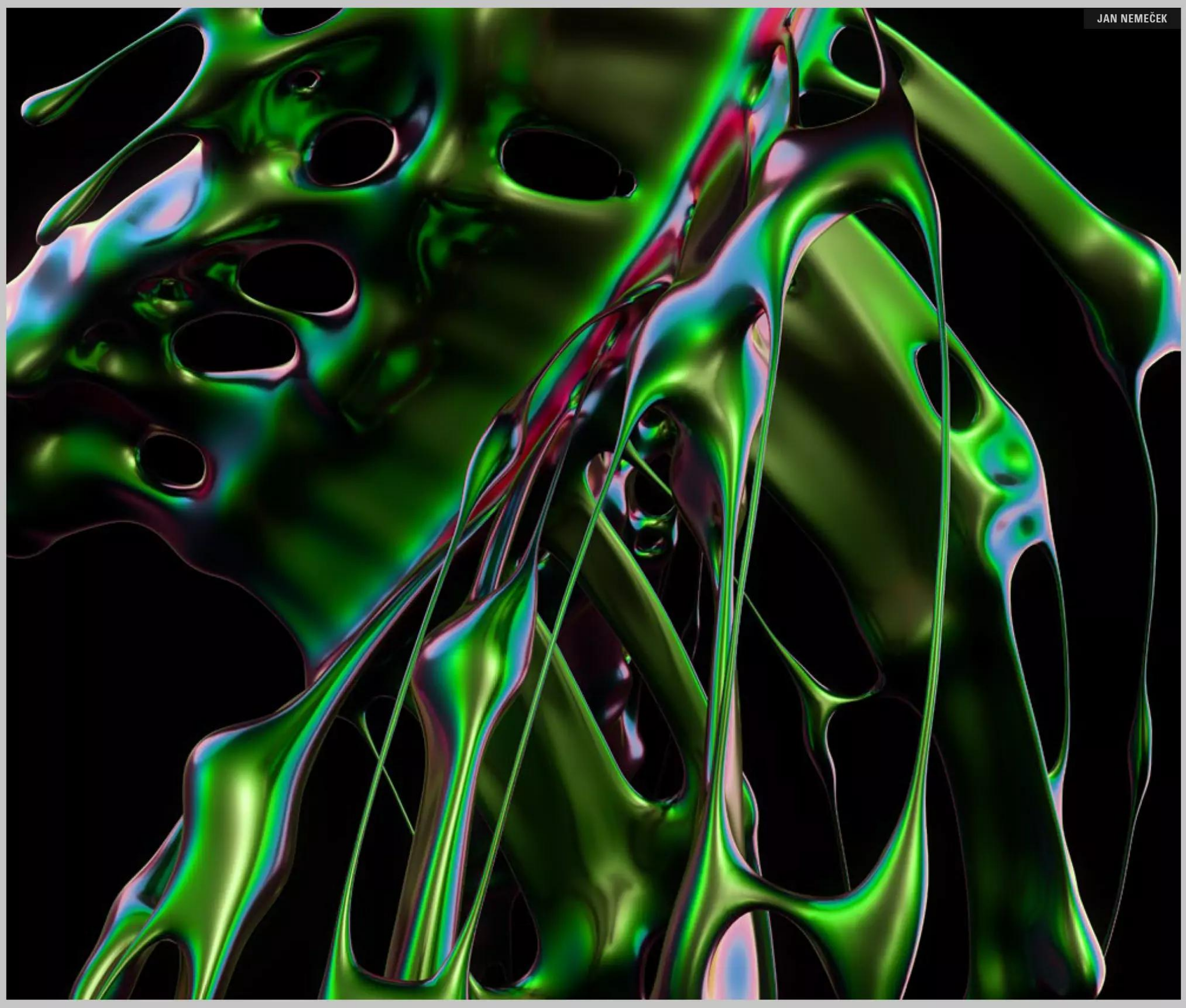
Often, an album of field recordings full of birdsong chatter and fuzzy rustling of the wind through trees can feel disconnected to the instrumentation, as though bolted on and running in discrete parallel. That's not the case with this series of early autumnal soundscapes, recorded on location by Phil Self (aka Dau) just after 2021's Smugglers Festival in Kent. Tracks such as 'Neu' and 'The First Of The Month' capture a kind of verdant bliss, like the sound of the land settling back into serenity. Gorgeous stuff. **ST**

ØJERUM
Your Soft Absence
ROOM40

On his latest album, Copenhagen's Paw Grabowski uses sampled wind instruments and sine waves to evoke a feeling of emotional displacement and degrading memories. The three long pieces – 'Portrait Of The Green Twilight', 'The Breath Wavers From The Earth's Ear' and 'Tomorrow We Commemorate The Falling Leaves' – emit a zen sense of stillness, on the surface, at least. Closer listening reveals a restless ephemerality, embodying Grabowski's concept of trying to hold onto something before it vanishes for good. This is a delicate, moving addition to the ØjeRum catalogue. **MS**

ROBAG WRUHME
TOR LP 001
TULPA OVI

Germany's Robag Wruhme was one of the leading lights of the minimal techno boom of the 2000s, but as this compilation of his recent work shows, he's evolved significantly since then. 'Robellada 22' bounds out of the blocks with samples of children playing and an eerie synth line, before 'Spoddy Spy' takes the tempo down, juxtaposing Boards Of Canada-style textures against a shuffling backbeat. Give these consistently interesting tracks just a few plays and they're bound to take up permanent residence in your head. **WS**



JAN NEMEČEK
Dissolved
REFRACTIONS

Serbian ambient artist Jan Nemeček builds all-enveloping works that blur the boundaries between the electronic and the organic. Based in Belgrade, he's been releasing music since 2005, and 'Dissolved' is his sixth album, combining digital synths with instruments like the Turkish lyre, bass guitar and prepared piano. 'Hoover Phase' broods with multilayered synth pads, crackling sound effects and twinkling auroras of melody, while 'On Subtle Horizon' builds into a wall of shoegaze fuzz. Brilliantly immersive. **BM**

HASSAN ABOU ALAM
Shalfata
YUKU

A bright and varied voice in current dance music, the Egyptian musician Hassan Abou Alam has released a string of EPs that are surefire belters. His fifth, arriving on Prague's YUKU label, offers up more quality club fare – bassy, high-octane and a little bizarre. 'Te3ebt' staggers with tricky false starts and energy flips, and is studded with Abou Alam's trademark rhythmic vocal chops in Arabic. On top of the four original compositions, there are also blazing remixes from fellow Cairo producers 3Phaz and ZULI. Music for getting down and having fun. **FH**

INFANT
Sigla, Sone
WARM WINTERS LTD

Michigan ambient producer Infant describes 'Sigla, Sone' as a series of "strikingly personal and diaristic sound postcards". If that is indeed the case then they must be sent from somewhere other than this mortal plane, so spectral and unearthly are the nine tracks on the album. Everyday sounds such as police sirens are manipulated into a billowing swirl on the seven-minute opener 'Part And Parcel', while 'Pebble' is a series of breathy, yearning vocal samples that seem to say, "Wish you were here". **IB**

WALLACE
Red, Yellow, Black
MULE MUSIQ

British producer Wallace is too young to remember the heyday of ambient house, when The Orb and their comrades broke new ground utilising natural sounds and quirky samples. He attempts to revive that era here, with field recordings of thunder, birdsong and running water shifting in and out over a variety of tempos that range from 2-step ('Tokyo Street') to deep house ('Labyrinth'). As home listening, it works beautifully, with enough to keep heads nodding and feet tapping. A very pleasant way to pass away an hour or so. **WS**

THE HOME CURRENT
Weekend Shark
MODERN AVIATION

Luxembourg-based Dane, Martin Jensen, claims no overall concept for this splendid collection of melodic grooves, but it feels like a celebration of the weekend itself, and – indeed – of the club and comedown culture of his youth. 'Ghostkicks' boasts Café Del Mar strings and squelchy synths, 'The Sugar Sea' adds irresistibly funky bongos to filthy fuzz bass. The title track, meanwhile, starts like 8-bit chiptune and ends with head-thumping beats and chants, a reminder that even the most delirious of weekends can leave some pretty nasty bite marks. **BF**

VARIOUS ARTISTS
Spectra Ex Machina / A Sound Anthology Of Occult Phenomena 1920-2017, Vol 2
SUB ROSA

How do you fancy communing with the ghosts of music past? This 17-track compilation is your ticket to a fascinating world of magicians, mystics and musicians. Dwelling on the fringes of the paranormal, the grainy, otherwordly nature of these rare archive recordings instantly ups the spooky factor. Tracks such as Joe Meek's 'I Hear A New World' (1960) will be familiar to some ears, while lesser-known gems like Aleister Crowley's 'The Call Of The First Aethyr' (1942) and Carmen Rogers' brilliant 'The Elvis Presley Séance' (1979) alone are worth the price of admission. **CF**

MIGUEL PEDRO
Sonofobia
REVOLVE

The latest album from Miguel Pedro, the Portuguese composer, musician, and drummer of cult band Mão Morta, is an edge-of-your-seat listening experience. 'Pedras' forms a striking 10-minute-plus opener, with ghost train drones and beats like footsteps down an echoing hall. 'Neon:80's' cranks up the fuzz and distortion, while the metallic glitches of 'Unha Em Quadro Preto' sound like a computer having a nervous breakdown. Even the ambient-ish 'Passos I' is given a spiky edge thanks to a skewed rhythm and enveloping electronics. Spooky, stylish sound design. **CF**

ALIEN KIN
The Avian Kin
FIRST TERRACE

Alien Kin ventures well beyond your average field recording project. An exploration of the otherworldly sonic qualities of Earth's ecosystems, curator Diane Barbé and friends journey through coniferous and deciduous environments, wielding sounds bent through a lens of biomimicry, interspecies communication and a fair helping of conceptual heft. Compositions like 'Transspecies Communication' and 'Bugs On The Cilia' are staggering, with piercing avian whistles overlapping in both harmonious accord and discordant irreverence. A fascinating blurring of boundaries between organic sounds and digital techniques. **FH**

MUSIQUE INFINIE
I
-OUS

This is the collaborative debut from Swiss composers/sound designers Noémi Büchi and Feldermelder. Given the duo's artistic commonality, as a united entity their music has a compounding effect. Consequently, many of these tracks – such as the impressive opener 'The Power Of Choice' – teem with a certainty that's missing from their work as individuals. Nevertheless, the more equivocal rejoiners offer the most drama, like 'Liquidation De La Nuit De L'Incalculable', which builds dynamically from a sliver of ambient tension. An impressive pairing. **JA**

ALEXANDER TILLEGREEN
In Words
RASTER

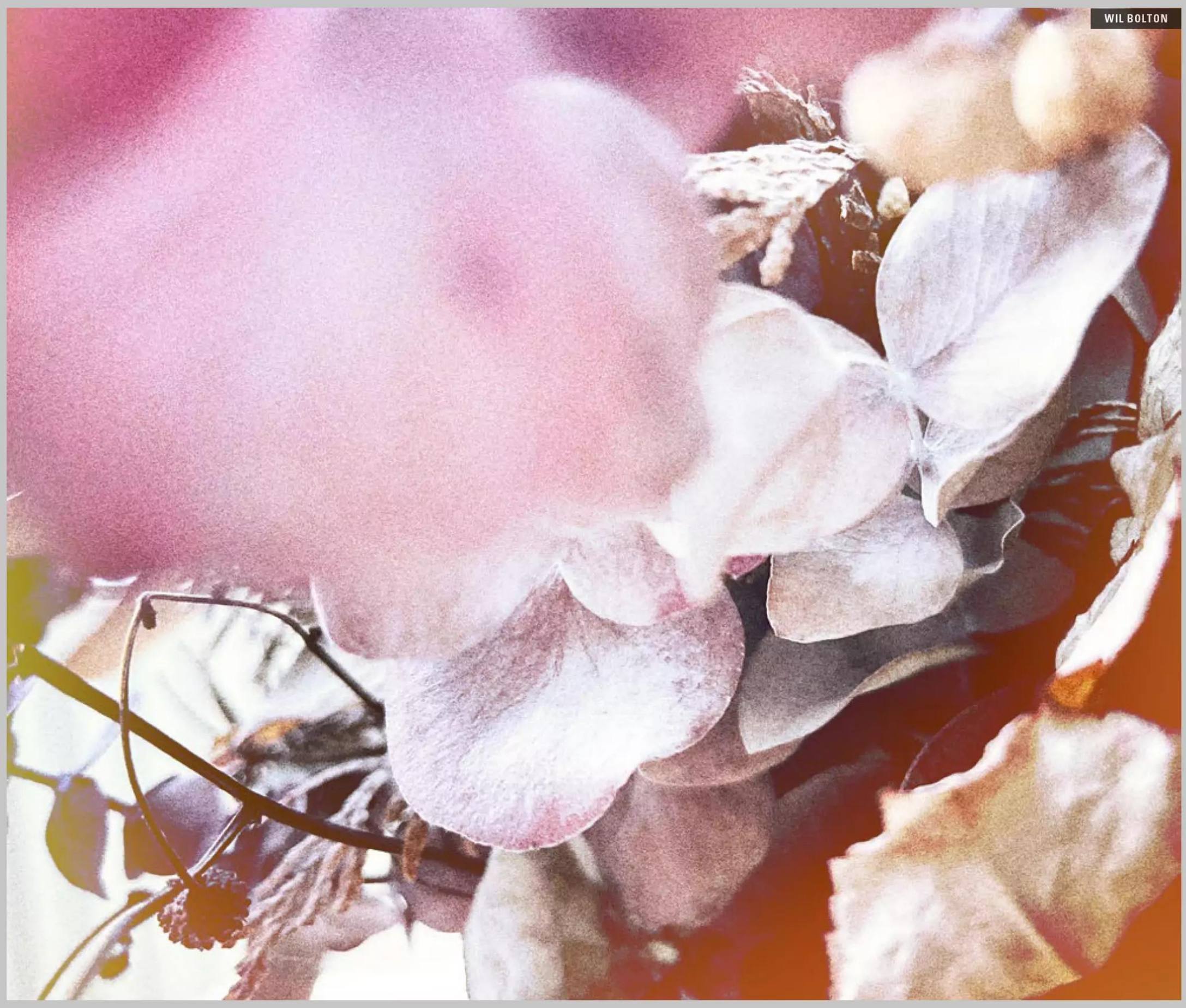
This remarkable solo debut by Danish sound and visual artist Alexander Tillegreen really gets under your skin. A conceptual representation of "psychoacoustic phenomena", the complex pieces on 'In Words' unfold like phonetic mirrors, as abstract electronics, auditory illusions and disorientating repetition – check out 'Phantom Streams (5 Movements)' – ripple and cascade through you in tingly, ASMR-like waves. Steeped in panoramic ambient, drone and glitchy polyrhythms (think Éliane Radigue, Pauline Oliveros, Moritz Von Oswald's Basic Channel), it's an alluring bamboozlement of sonic and sensory riches. **VI**

DARK FIDELITY HIFI
Faith And Popcorn
WAXING CRESCENT

At the core of Manchester electronic musician Rick Jones' latest Dark Fidelity HIFI album is a sense of calm and tranquil serenity, with lots of soft pads, delicate melodies and enveloping reverb to be found here. It's the mid-90s electronica framing of those elements that gives this collection its distinctive edge, however, with 'The Happy Consumer' and 'Suburban Hollow' featuring crisp electro beats, and 'Melt Structures' and 'The Late Caller' adopting ghostly, jazzy outlines of drum 'n' bass rhythms. Engaging music for midnight reflections. **MS**

MIKE SHERIDAN
Atmospherics
HFN MUSIC

Sheridan was a teenage techno sensation in his native Denmark, winning huge acclaim for his first two albums and earning support from Trentemøller. After more than a decade away from music, his belated comeback skips through a range of styles, from the glitchy beats of the strings-adorned opener 'Impulse', to spacey dub techno ('Strata') and exquisite tear-stained electronic ballads ('Megaparsec' and 'Minds I'). Clearly a versatile producer, hopefully this elegantly poised, wistful album wins the wider audience beyond Scandinavia that it deserves. **WS**



WIL BOLTON
Null Point
THE SLOW MUSIC MOVEMENT

London producer Wil Bolton makes the shift from beatless to beat-led with ‘Null Point’, but still occupies the chilled ambient area he’s best known for. So rather than raging four-to-the-floor techno beats or Amen breaks, the six tracks here are subtly rhythmic. ‘Sandalwood’ uses fizzes and pops to build momentum around an echoing piano, ‘Rails Overhead’ employs a once-per-bar kick drum, and ‘Patina’ lands not far from a dubby Basic Channel experiment. As exercises go, it’s far from pointless. **BW**

TERESA WINTER
Proserpine
NIGHT SCHOOL

If you didn’t already know that Leeds experimental artist Teresa Winter is hugely influenced by Delia Derbyshire (she wrote her musicology PhD on the work of the trailblazing electronic composer), her newest album ‘Proserpine’ will leave you in little doubt. Its nine tracks are steeped in restlessness and apprehension, taking a particular synth pattern or real-world sample and shaping it like Play-Doh until it resembles a rain-spattered lake (‘New Water’) or a dew-flecked field at sunrise (‘Plume’). Delia would have loved it. **IB**

BITW
Rehearse
KLEP DIM TREP

Gruff Ab Arwel christened this musical project with a Welsh word for “tiny”, which says a lot about his self-effacing genius. It also proves that good things do indeed come in small packages. Featuring plenty of live musicianship, ‘Rehearse’ has a bigger scope than the lo-fi electronic set-up of his eponymous 2019 debut, with Ab Arwel fleshing out the folky pop of ‘The Rust’ with bold brass, while ‘Why Are We Dancing?’ and ‘When I Was You’ hail from the same whimsical Welsh wonderland as Gorky’s Zygotic Mynci. **PC**

CONFLUX COLDWELL
Memorex Mori
SUBEXOTIC

For the soundtrack to his film ‘Memorex Mori’, Leeds musician Michael C Coldwell turned to a forgotten box of old VHS cassettes featuring some of his earliest sound adventures. Tapping into poignant themes of degrading memories and decaying objects, these moments are inevitably freighted with haunted disconnectedness. Tape hiss and inchoate rhythms obfuscate any clarity on ‘Lost Work’, while muted industrial pulses, warped, unplaceable samples and a stalking sequencer pattern on ‘Helical Scan’ mark a highlight of Coldwell’s upcycled imagination. **MS**

VARIOUS ARTISTS
Visions Vol 2
DUALITY TRAX

This compilation from Belfast DJ Holly Lester's label brings together a host of upcoming dance producers, with all profits going to the Palestine Children's Relief Fund. As well as supporting a noble cause, 'Visions Vol 2' is a great snapshot of current dance music, moving from the bleepy breakbeat of Stones Taro's 'Iron Door' via the classic house of DAWS' 'Early Desire' to the synth-driven drum 'n' bass of Body Clinic's '159 Revolutions Per Minute'. An excellent study of rising talent. **BM**

EVA SAJANOVA & DOMINIK SUCHY
Decision Paralysis
WELTSCHMERZEN

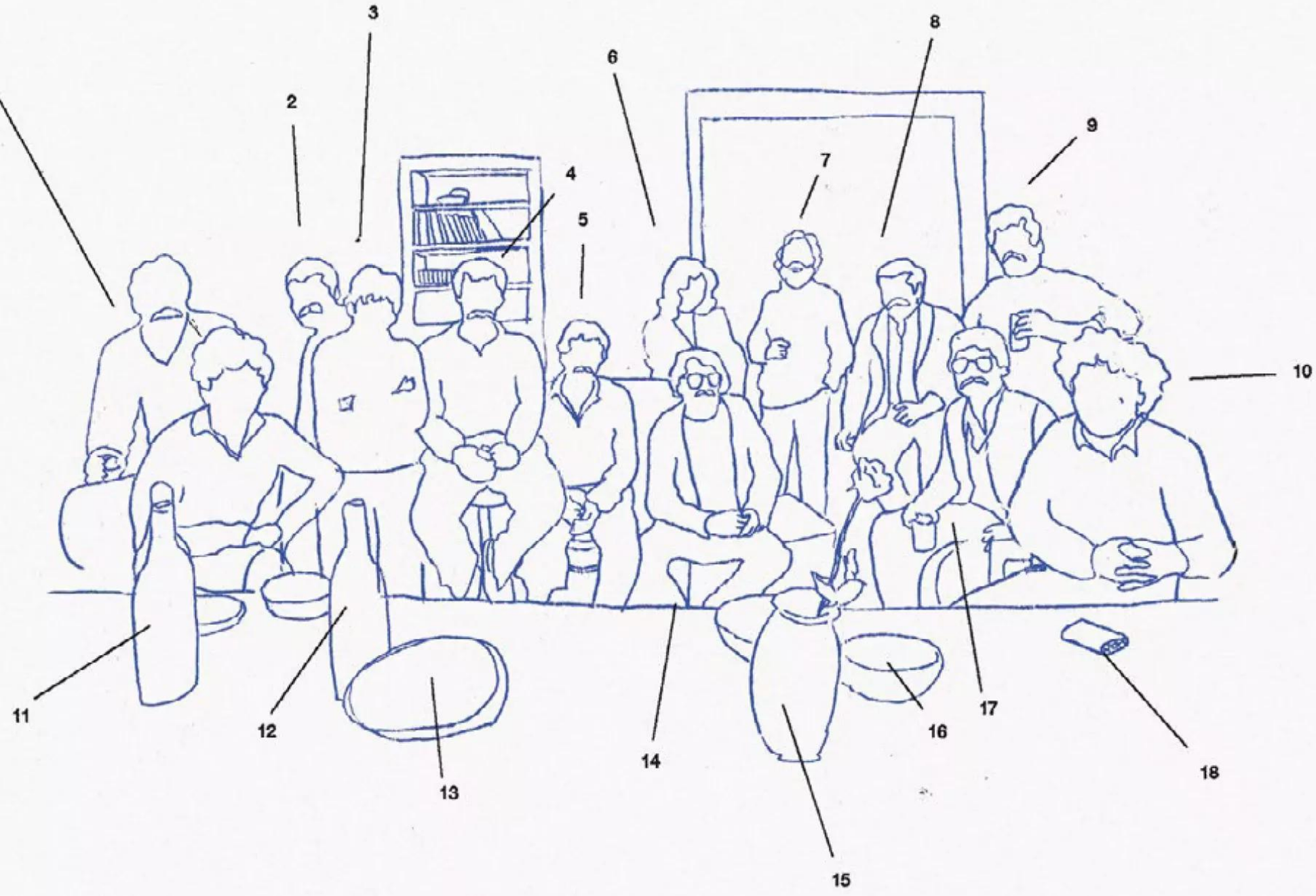
It's rare to encounter a beatless album as propulsive as this. The debut collaboration between fellow Slovaks, singer Eva Sajanova (God And Eve) and experimental/noise artist Dominik Suchy (Tittingur), is an intense listen, blending The Knife-style analogue experimentation with bountiful layers of Sajanova's multifaceted vocals. It Veers from studied frenzy (the melodic shifts and vocal swoops of 'NeTitulovaná') and intense synth arpeggios with Björk-ish whispering ('Stačí Len Byť Dosť?') to the woozily intimate 'Koniec Koniec'. Who needs beats when there's this much energy? **AT**

MIRADASVACAS
Of No Fixed Abode
12TH ISLE

Much like how a collage artist creates a cohesive work from scraps of paper, Madrid's Pablo Mirón and Juan Vacas have crafted this quietly compelling record using a fragmented palette of field recordings and found materials, manipulated instruments, radios and turntables. Gentle keys coalesce beautifully with looped, shattered vocals, tape crackles and scrapes on 'IV', while 'VII' is a dreamy excursion through soft waves of electronics and semi-submerged voices. It's all expertly woven together, making 'Of No Fixed Abode' a work of beguiling fluctuations. **CF**

DIJF SANDERS
Supra
UNDAY

After albums inspired by trips to Indonesia (2017's 'Java') and Nepal (2020's 'Puja'), Belgian producer Dijf Sanders turns to the traditional chants of Georgia for 'Supra'. The results are like a pleasurable Philip Glass-meets-Mike Paradinas affair, with the opener, 'Bird's Milk', offering euphoric voices and crystal-clear electronic melodies. Elsewhere, guitars and violins add a nice friction between organic and synthetic sounds. The techno beat, bulging synths, and AFX-style vocals of 'Mingrelian Song' provide a standout moment, but 'Supra' has much to offer throughout. **BW**



COSMIC ANALOG ENSEMBLE

Les Grandes Vacances

JAKARTA

Cosmic Analog Ensemble might sound like a collective, but it's actually all the work of one man. Lebanese composer, arranger and multi-instrumentalist Charif Megarbane has put out a wealth of symphonic funk and European film score-influenced music under the Cosmic Analog Ensemble alias (among others) in recent times. So prolific is he, that if he were starting out now, you'd be forgiven for assuming he'd been aided by some kind of artificial intelligence. 'Les Grandes Vacances' is a beautiful splurge of yet more well-appointed and well-upholstered music which taps into the dubious glamour of a colonialist past.

There are 18 tracks to enjoy here (plus three bonus tracks on the CD version). Highlights include 'Interruption Introduction', which transposes broken radio signals over an irresistible big beat, while 'Schmall Talk' is elegantly baroque and spooky – and very, very French-sounding – with all the hallmarks of a lavish François De Roubaix score. 'The Laws Of Subtraction', meanwhile, features droid-like electronic squiggles over an otherwise smooth, string-laden, easy listening experience, making for an entertaining juxtaposition. **JA**

VARIOUS ARTISTS

Maloca: Vol 2

MALOCA

Founded by Belgian producer Le Motel just over three years ago, the Brussels label Maloca has made waves in a relatively short space of time. Pulling together key cuts by artists old and new from the clubbing fraternity all around the globe, this 17-track compilation is a real belter, an exhilarating snapshot of what Maloca's all about.

As a showcase for the raw innovation to be found in clubland right now, there's an inherent freshness, vitality and requisite edge to much of what's on offer here, in all its splintered electronic, drum 'n' bass and dancefloor-facing glory. From Swiss rising star NVST ('Destroyed In The Base Of One Rhythm') to the Kraftwerkian electro-techno of Lithuania's DJ JM ('Stalk') and the nimble clicks and cuts of Dutch techno maestro Konduku ('Alleen Valleen Katten'), it really kicks. One thing's for certain – the future of club-focused music looks to be in very safe hands indeed. **VI**

ALEXANDER R CARGILL ESQ

Bromham

WOODFORD HALSE

Bromham? A picturesque Wiltshire village boasting a bowls club, a 13th century church and – as of now – a rather beautiful musical homage from Alex Cargill, the artist formerly known as The Central Office Of Information. Cargill's family history is celebrated throughout – sometimes literally. 'The Oldest Man In The Village' is his 104-year-old Great Uncle Ivor, whose cryptic spoken contribution ("My secret to a long and happy life…") is embedded into a rumble of woozy synths.

Meanwhile, 'Thisledo' (the name of Cargill's great-grandparents' tumbledown cottage) is a Boards Of Canada-style daydream, and '48 New Road' (his grandparents' house) sounds like a battered Wurlitzer organ rising from the floor of Bromham Social Centre – an institution that Cargill also honours here, this time with Test Card electronica and skittering beats. And to finish? 'Bromham Carnival Queen, 1967' employs somnambulant Pink Floyd guitars in tribute to the proud holder of said title, Cargill's mother Linda. It's the conclusion to a wistfully charming celebration of fading childhood memories. **BF**

MICHAL TURTLE
Same Songs, Different Room
INVISIBLE, INC.

British experimental musician Michal Turtle released 'Music From The Living Room' in 1983, a collection of shimmering and illusory pieces which range between atonal ambient and nocturnal electro. Having spent the following 40 years composing, producing and contributing to an eclectic range of projects, his debut album quietly dropped off the radar, becoming a bit of a forgotten classic.

On 'Same Songs, Different Room', Turtle has reworked and reimagined those original pieces, retaining their unique character, but buffing their surfaces to a glamorous new sheen. 'Are You Psychic?' bolsters the spare production of the earlier version, its languid, sparkling tone oddly recalling Mick Smiley's 'Magic', with tracks such as 'Village Voice' and 'Yak By Yak' offering equally novel and engaging updates. 'Same Songs, Different Room' could have ended up as a pleasant curiosity, a reminder to revisit the source material – in fact, it stands as a compelling project on its own terms, worthy of subsequent revisits. **ST**

MARK VAN HOEN
Plan For A Miracle
DELL'ORSO

Seefeel co-founder Mark Van Hoen, who has also recorded under the names Autocreation and Locust, presents the first new material under his given name since 2018. And what a remarkably affecting, majestically broad, and captivating work it is. Some of 'Plan For A Miracle' – titled in reference to the passing of his beloved wife – was recorded outdoors, including in the Joshua Tree desert, using a bespoke 4-track tape and modular synth set-up. That maverick, though considered, approach is telling.

Throughout, Van Hoen demonstrates his seasoned feel for atmosphere, texture, balance and nuance, though what strikes you most is the album's myriad diversity. Often evoking a sense of singularity that somehow places them in different eras, tracks like the pellucid 'Climates' have the poised quality of late-1970s Eno, while 'This Is For Them' feels like Aphex Twin's insistent but distinctively late-night unearthliness. The magnificent, levitating 'Pencil Of Spheres' meanwhile, inhabits a shimmering, light-filled sound world entirely of its own, which is deeply affecting at a molecular level. Outstanding. **CG**

VARIOUS ARTISTS
To Light A Candle Is To Cast A Shadow
CLUSTER NODE

Ethereal is a word that's easily tossed around when it comes to ambient music, so when you stumble across the real thing, something truly gossamer-fine, evocative and just plain beautiful, it pulls you up short. Much of London label Cluster Node's 'To Light A Candle Is To Cast A Shadow' compilation dwells here, on the outer fringes of neogothic romance reminiscent of 4AD's This Mortal Coil.

Sky-scraping peaks abound on the sounds of Frankfurt musician Man Rei's 'How 2 B Heavy', 'Be With Me' by Ghost Tracks (Sylvia Girstmair and David Lopez, who run Cluster Node) and Bianca Scout's 'Whwn U Think'. All three boast gorgeous, celestial vocals, and also conspire to gently smother you in reverb. 'To Light A Candle Is To Cast A Shadow' is a visionary compilation that navigates exquisite highs (including Feeler's cascading beauty, 'Highest Heaven') and Boards Of Canada-rich archaeological depths (Northern Irish artist An Trinse's 'Duairc Aontais'), but it is never anything less than otherworldly. Ethereal, and then some. **AT**

MINING
Chimet
THE LEAF LABEL

It's reasonable to expect that an album based around Storm Brian and Hurricane Ophelia, two intense weather events that hit the UK in October 2017, might be a raucous, raging tumult of climatic chaos. Well, not if the album is made by MINING, a trio comprising Matthew Bourne, PJ Davy and Craig Kirkpatrick-Whitby. This collection of elongated soundscapes takes its name from the Chichester West Pole Beacon (or Chimet), a weather information system operating in West Sussex. Rather than the destructive energy of natural forces, MINING channel contemplation and slow-rolling introspection.

The album opens with 'Ophelia', an almost 15-minute swathe of low-key drone, plotted from the data collected by Chimet and punctuated by Bourne's precipitous piano and cello. While the tone is disarming, undercutting expectations of rumbling, stormy electronics, 'Debris' and 'Force 10 Pts 1 & 2' offer a hint of brute power churning below, and provide the album's most compelling moments. **ST**

BLACK DEVIL DISCO CLUB
Etincelles
LO

After releasing the first Black Devil Disco Club LP in 1978, French producer Bernard Fevre put the project on ice until the 21st century. Illuminating a dreamy synthetic universe, 'Etincelles' teleports us back to the golden age of Gallic electro-disco, evoking the ennui of an imaginary, early 1980s jet set, jaded with a lifestyle of champagne and private planes.

If you dig the sublime nu-disco of Black Van and the softly cooed French of Étienne Daho, this is a record that will gently caress your pleasure centres. The cantering 'Corps Magnifique' is propelled by 303 squelch, featherlight synths and boop-boop-be-doop backing singers. The title track contrasts a melancholic vocal with elegant piano and a perky rhythmic backdrop, while 'Pof Pof Pof' echoes the insistent sequencers of Cerrone's epochal 'Striptease'. A concise album of impeccable cosmic disco pedigree, 'Etincelles' will leave you purring contentedly. **SB**

YĪN YĪN
Mount Matsu
GLITTERBEAT

Throughout the patchwork of influences stitched together by Maastricht quartet YĪN YĪN there's one common thread. Essentially, their previous albums (2019's 'The Rabbit That Hunts Tigers' and 2022's 'The Age Of Aquarius') were full of music perfect for wearing a kaftan to – whether the vibe was sitting frazzled on the floor of a 1970s commune in Cologne during a krautrock jam, or swirling around a Ko Pha-ngan beach to the funky riffs of 60s psychedelic Thai rock.

Now 'Mount Matsu' adds to the list – reclining on a yacht off the California coast ('Shiatsu For Dinner'), seduction by an enigmatic stranger in a silk-draped boudoir ('Komori Uta') and meditating in a temple in Koyasan ('Ascending To Matsu's Height'). Tracks such as 'Pia Dance' and 'Tokyo Disko', meanwhile, bounce along on rollicking rhythms while turning the guitars and keyboards up to blinding technicolor. Their music sits alongside that of fellow sonic travellers Khruangbin and L'Eclair, and now's the time to buy a ticket for YĪN YĪN's magical mystery tour – if you're not already onboard. **PC**

COLIN NEWMAN
Bastard
SWIM~

Wire man's solo techno work gets a reissue

The title of Colin Newman's last solo album could have been what Elastica said after learning they were being sued by his publishers for ripping off Wire's 'Three Girl Rhumba'. Justine Frischmann and co might have been the most egregious example but, when 'Bastard' was first released in 1997, it seemed like one of the very few people who weren't trying to sound like Wire was the band's frontman himself.

While plenty of the Britpop pack on this side of the Atlantic, and post-hardcore bands like Shellac on the other, were emulating the angular guitar pop Wire perfected on 1977's 'Pink Flag', the group themselves had gone in more electronic directions on 1990's 'Manscape'. Newman's solo albums 'Commercial Suicide' and 'It Seems' also largely swapped out six-stringed riffs for synths and sequencers.

'Bastard', however, does feel like Newman trying to sound like other people. A collaboration with his long-time partner and Minimal Compact member Malka Spigel, 'Bastard' was inspired by the phrase "faceless techno bollocks" bandied around about artists like Bandulu and Autechre at the time.

'Sticky', for example, is pure 'Artificial Intelligence'-grade electronica. Other contemporaneous influences include the moody post-rock of Bark Psychosis on 'Without', while 'Turn' follows the drum 'n' bass path Bark Psychosis frontman Graham Sutton took with his solo Boymerang project.

At other points, though, 'Bastard' seems to contain early examples of genres that would only really coalesce in the following decade. The tricksy rhythms of 'Spiked' would have been dubbed math rock if released five years later, and 'The Orange House & The Blue House', with its dubby bassline and squalling guitar, presages the 2000s' punk-funk revival.

Yet the album's defining feature isn't Newman's adroit mastery of disparate genres, but the complete absence of his voice. This vinyl reissue comes with extra tracks of sophisticated IDM culled from earlier EPs, alongside four unreleased tracks. Only in a couple of those, such as 'Cut The Slack' and 'Unbroken', with Newman singing over simple stripped-down guitars, does anything resembling the punk music he's most renowned for emerge.

Heard in this context, they're a reminder that while Newman might always be "the singer from Wire", he's spent a fair part of his career producing electronic music in projects like Immersion – and that's the family to which 'Bastard' belongs.

PAUL CLARKE

Shop Talk

YĪN YĪN's **Kees Berkers** opens up his record bag

Hi Kees! Tell us a bit about your favourite record store?
"I think the whole band's favourite record store is Bongo Joe in Geneva. They also have a record label and started out in a very small location, which we already loved. Now they have moved to a bigger, dream location directly on the water, where you can listen to vinyl while the ducks swim past.

"They have a ridiculously good vinyl collection of music from all over the world. The staff are super-sweet and handsome, the drinks and pastries are delicious, and since Bongo Joe released our first records we have a strong, warm connection with them."

What's your favourite way to discover new music?
"Digging for vinyl in a record store is Erik's and my favourite way of finding music. However, you can't deny that the Spotify recommendations do come up with some good new discoveries.

"For Robbert and Remy, it's more about friends sending links, Shazam, artists on socials that recommend other artists and, of course, going to festivals and being blown away by an unknown artist. These are the nicest ways to come across new music. Plus some blogs here and there, and hours and hours in the tour bus where we show each other new stuff."

Have you ever purchased a record based on the cover art alone?
"When I'm at a vinyl market outdoors and listening is impossible, I might buy a record because of its looks – especially when it's cheap, you can take a chance. I bought the Japon Éternel records purely because I really liked the covert art. The music is fortunately wonderful as well. I also bought Silicon Dream's 'Ludwig Fun' because I thought the album art was funny. The music, unfortunately, is shit."

What rare or special records would you love to get your hands on?
"Kyoto's 'Venetian Blinds' 12-inch, Hiroshi Satoh's 'This Boy' album, the Donny Benét 'Konichiwa' seven-inch, Shohjo-Tai & Red Bus St Project's 'Escape' and YĪN YĪN's 'The Age Of Aquarius' golden vinyl edition!"

Finally, tell us about your record collection?
"I started buying vinyl records when I was around 16 years old. I became a resident DJ at two different drum 'n' bass nights, so I was buying loads of drum 'n' bass and jungle in the early 2000s. Then I had different periods where I collected 1940s, 50s and 60s soul music seven-inches, early independent garage rock compilations, and early house, techno, and breakcore.

"My last hyper-focus over the past two years was to collect 80s Italo/electro gems on 12-inch. I think I've got roughly 2,500 records. I also love cassette tapes, and I used to spend hours and hours organising my iTunes library. The last album I bought was Youth Lagoon's 'Heaven Is A Junkyard'. I've listened to that one a lot and will cherish it for the rest of my life."

YĪN YĪN's 'Mount Matsu' is released by Glitterbeat on 19 January

Buried Treasure

THE TWINS

A Wild Romance

HANSA INTERNATIONAL, 1983

The Twins were a synthpop group formed in Berlin in 1980, and unlike the twins of the Thompson variety, there were just two of them. Rather disappointingly though, they weren't actually twins.

The duo were Sven Dohrow and Ronnie Schreinzer, and they essentially got together with the intention of forming a musical outfit that could mimic the sound of their favourite English electronic artists, particularly Gary Numan and Tubeway Army, Orchestral Manoeuvres In The Dark, and later, a fledgling Depeche Mode.

Not long after their formation, however, The Twins began to have some success of their own. They were particularly well-received in Italy, where the pop-pickers loved their glittering, sharply produced sound so much that the duo scored three Top 10 hits there ('Face To Face – Heart To Heart', 'Not The Loving Kind' and 'Ballet Dancer') in a mere 18 months between 1982 and 1984.

It was also around this time that Dohrow and Schreinzer released their third album 'A Wild Romance', the only LP to chart in their native Germany. Nowadays it sounds overtly of its time, but in many ways that's a big part of its appeal. Tracks like 'Criminal Love', 'Facts Of Love' and 'Must Have Her Back' encapsulate the excitement of the burgeoning European synthpop scene, with dramatic stabs of melody, peppy singalong choruses and machine beats drenched in gated reverb.

But the moments with the most musical longevity come when the pair slow everything down, such as on the album's title cut, which has to be one of the most grossly overlooked electronic songs of the era. The ebb and flow of the lush synth layers in the verse, coupled with Schreinzer's commanding but faintly desire-tinged vocal in the chorus, is a killer combination. It's also one that numerous, more successful acts like the Pet Shop Boys were pursuing well into the 1990s.

Meanwhile, if you're hankering for more information about Dohrow and Schreinzer, you can visit the "Twinfo" section of their website, which features an abundance of personal facts about the pair including their star sign, eye colour, culinary style and even their favourite pets. You heard it here first, remember.

IMOGEN BEBB

ARIEL KALMA, JEREMIAH CHIU & MARTA SOFIA HONER

The Closest Thing To Silence

INTERNATIONAL ANTHEM

Glorious collaborative ambient with an edge

Think about new age and fourth world music and the names of certain artists – such as Jon Hassell and Terry Riley – immediately spring to mind. Ariel Kalma, on the other hand, is much lesser-known, and it's a pity, because this French musician's story is truly fascinating.

Kalma's life is as colourful and far-reaching as his music, which over his decades-spanning career has variously touched on ambient, jazz, drone, electroacoustic, minimalism and more.

Born in Paris, he learned the saxophone as a teenager, and has played with several jazz, pop and rock bands. He studied electronics, computer science, music and art, before setting off on world travels that saw him learn circular breathing from a snake charmer in India, take up stringed instruments in the Middle East, and spend time practising in a cathedral basement in New York. He also worked for a time at Paris' legendary INA GRM (Groupe de Recherches Musicales) studio, the birthplace of musique concrète.

With such an engaging biography, it's little wonder Kalma's music is similarly engrossing. His recorded output is obscure and mostly confined to rarities, but this new collaborative album with the Los Angeles duo comprising synthesist Jeremiah Chiu and contemporary violinist Marta Sofia Honer will no doubt lead to a deserved resurgence of interest in his output.

From the moment that the opening track 'Ten Hour Wave' begins with a burst of hypnotic, moody saxophone, sky-chasing ambient electronics and beatific strings, it's clear that this is an inspired union. The ethereal textures and mythical, magical quality of Chiu and Honer's beautiful 2022 LP 'Recordings From The Åland Islands' reappear, and are heightened by Kalma's manipulated woodwind and canny compositional skills.

On the standout 'Écoute Au Loin', in a brilliant breakdown, the swirling sounds are punctuated by a looped voice note of Kalma discussing his creative ideas. It's a personal touch that adds another layer of warmth to these already vibrant pieces.

The album came about following a project the three artists worked on for the BBC Radio 3 programme 'Late Junction'. It's no surprise to find out that Chiu was already a long-term fan of Kalma's output before fate gave them the chance to collaborate. His bubbling synthesisers on 'Dizzy Ditty', in particular, sound in perfect conceptual sync with Kalma and Honer's playing, and it's this harmonious quality that makes 'The Closest Thing To Silence' a transcendent listening experience.

CLAIRE FRANCIS

PABLO DISERENS & THE OCEAN COMM/UNI/TY

Upstream Ensemble

FORMS OF MINUTIAE

For 'Upstream Ensemble', electronic musician and field recordist Pablo Diserens invited 35 fellow artists to contribute sound recordings of different water environments. These were then organised together into a single, flowing, 30-minute composition that collectively highlights just how sonically diverse our waterways, oceans and their inhabitants are. This is an album deserving of attention, with Diserens offering some sounds that are quiet and contemplative, and others which are often noisy and cacophonous.

A loud and almost comedic sequence of sea lion barks falls into the first category, their unpredictable calls and guttural conversation resonating across a harbour with rich, enfolding reverb. In the quieter moments, we hear distant gulls, waves lapping onto the shoreline and, around the nine-minute mark, the incessant dripping of water in a subterranean cave. 'Upstream Ensemble' is a vast collaboration between Diserens, the many artists involved and, most importantly, the vibrant sound worlds of our planet itself. **MS**

VARIOUS ARTISTS

Pop Ambient 2024

KOMPAKT

Curated by Kompakt label co-founder Wolfgang Voigt and featuring many regular names from the previous 'Pop Ambient' editions, these 15 tracks err towards the more meditative end of the genre. Some are simplicity itself – Blank Gloss' 'Weedless Hook' is just a few guitar notes bathed in cartfuls of reverb, while forlorn trumpets adorn the barren landscape of Sono Kollektiv's 'Ever Last Thing'.

Others are more playful, like Morgen Wurde's 'Hiernach', which features a brass fanfare against swooshing synths, while Ümit Han's 'Nirgends' sports an elfish little synth figure that could have come from an early 1980s electropop hit. From time to time, there's also a more sinister tone. Segensklang's 'Bergfrieden' features clouds of synths gathering threateningly overhead but, for the most part, a haze of quiet rumination settles over this album. It's a consistently high-quality series, and this latest issue of 'Pop Ambient' strikes gold once again. **WS**

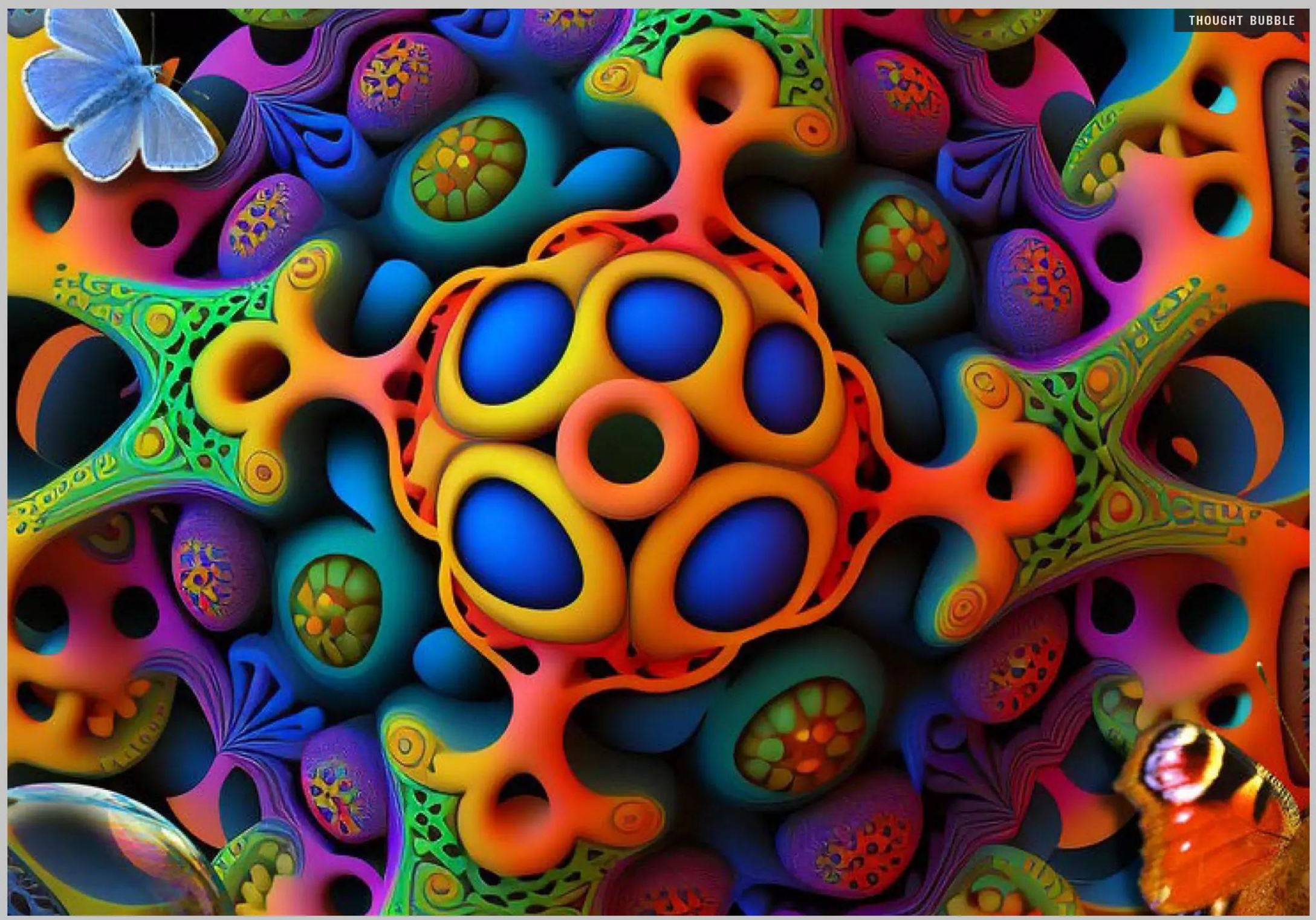
THE FAUNS

How Lost

INVADA

Fans of The Fauns will rejoice at this return, after a decade-long hiatus that has seen the Bristol shoegazers broaden their sound in all directions. On this, their long-awaited third album, their trademark indie-fuzz is still present and correct, but now flies alongside a neon-lit, cinematic and newly electrified sound that will only serve to broaden their appeal.

Core 2007 founders Alison Garner, Michael Savage and Guy Rhys Davies were joined in 2019 by accomplished soundtrack composer Will Slater, who has clearly been the catalyst for this new, dimension-added vibration. He brings something of Chromatics' glossy dreampop melancholy to the driving opener 'Mixtape Days', which carries Garner's magnificently breathy, insistent vocals into resplendent territory. The title track is also a beauty. Opening with intricately shimmering guitars of Cocteau Twins vintage, it segues into a soaring, drum machine gateway to the celestial ether. Lit by Garner's ethereal, vapour-trailing voice, it effortlessly fuses inherent nostalgia with propulsive vitality. Recommended. **CG**



THOUGHT BUBBLE

Beguiled

MOOLAKII CLUB AUDIO INTERFACE

Thought Bubble is a moniker that remains as appropriate as ever to the music of keyboardist Chris Cordwell and percussionist Nick Raybould. Their new album 'Beguiled' invites you to partake in stimulating, multilayered "alt-electronica" that trips and flits across palpable moods and dispositions, as if it's actively trying to avoid being categorised.

As such, the best way to describe the piece would be curious, in that tracks like the space rock-heavy 'Eclipse Of Reason', the lithe and skittish 'Later' and the turbulent, cosmic 'ReEntry' reel you in without questioning, but subsequently provide you with few concrete conclusions. This is both the record's greatest strength and its most significant foible – the nine tracks here are not songs as such, they are explorations in trains of thought or journeys within the subconscious. Challenging, yes, but equally an enjoyable and fascinating listen. **IB**

L PETITGAND + SCANNER + GEINS'T NAÏT

Et Il Y'Avait

ICI D'AILLEURS

Revolution, refinement or re-tread? It's the choice that artists recording their second album must inevitably face. Many opt for the comfortable recreation of familiar themes and sounds. Not here though. 'Et Il Y'Avait' is a fusion of French provocateurs, with Laurent Petitgand's cinematic finesse (refined over years spent soundtracking Wim Wenders' films) and Geins't Naït's industrial edge both tussling with Scanner's ambient mastery. It offers a darkly atmospheric journey that's distinct from their 2023 debut, 'OLA'.

Where 'OLA' was stentorian beats, this is home to the sound of pianos churning like waves ('Gabriel Scan LP1') and Middle Eastern atmospherics ('Idiot LP1'). In contrast to these beguiling organic sounds is the insectoid buzz of 'Larsen Scan', 'Hey Man Scan' and 'Picass LP1' and, perhaps most arresting of all, the crisp martial beats and chanting of 'Italia LP4'. A study in moving on while remaining true to your vision, 'Et Il Y'Avait' is an immersive experience and a must-have for connoisseurs of the darker shades of ambient and industrial music. **AT**

KIT GRILL

Swimming In Honey

PRIMARY COLOURS

Probably best-known for his far reaching NTS radio show, London producer and multidisciplinary artist Kit Grill takes a stylistic swerve on this, his seventh solo LP released during a decade in the business. Many artists choose to augment their dreampop experiments with vocals, and then bury them deep in the accompanying music, but Grill's are a far cry from this usual position. From the opening song 'The Vine' onwards, his voice is surprisingly forward in the mix, every word as clear as day.

The press notes for 'Swimming In Honey' recognise the influence of Jefre Cantu-Ledesma and The Durutti Column, as well as New Order circa 'Power, Corruption & Lies'. But to these ears, tracks like 'Country Boy' and much else here have the intimate, confessional feel and melodic naivety of Jason Pierce at his best, albeit with spiralling synths taking the place of Spiritualized's guitars. Songs like 'The River Runs Blue' and the OMD-esque 'In A Landscape' are equally raw and emotional, making this album an often touching, always compelling experience. **BW**

MUERAN HUMANOS

Reemplazante

STERBT MENSCHEN

Latin American electro-punk attitude

When it comes to music that piques your interest, it's often the merest detail that swings it. In the case of this career-peak fourth album from Berlin-based Argentinian duo Carmen Burguess and Tomás Nochteff, it's the fact that 'Reemplazante' was first composed on a primitive second-hand keyboard that cost €20, and a bass guitar plugged into a toy amplifier found in a skip. These tracks were then processed through a considerably more sophisticated arsenal of analogue and digital equipment, but that seems immaterial – it's that DIY principle that counts.

Mueran Humanos translates as "Die Humans!", and it's no surprise that the pair's formative years saw them confront conformity as radical, agit-prop art experimentalists. Since their self-titled debut album, which was released in 2011, their sound has slowly evolved through the increasing use of tapes, samplers and synths into the hugely original and spikily compelling forms we hear on 'Reemplazante'.

Much of the depth and layered substance here stems from their burgeoning reputation on the European performance circuit, where they've honed their sound after sharing stages with the likes of Swans, Martin Rev, Psychic TV and Neu!'s Michael Rother. In both their live shows and recorded output, everything revolves around the raw beauty of Burguess' vocals and the driving, melodic complexity of Nochteff's Peter Hook-indebted basslines.

The sometimes elegiac, but often viscerally post-punk edginess of the Joy Division-New Order transition phase is channelled right from the off on the rousing, politicised call-to-arms 'Desastre Personal', as well as on the seductively episodic title track. The disarmingly delicate and brilliantly poised 'Cadenas De La Infancia' encapsulates the penetrating sharpness that lies at the heart of this impressive album.

Elsewhere, there are so many dramatic, unexpected twists and turns in tone and pace to enjoy. From the street-punk stomp of 'Un Lugar Cerebral' and its irresistible breakneck intensity, through the scintillating glitterball electronics of techno-flecked floorfiller 'Dentaduras', and then on to the hypnotic minor-key arrest of the beautifully emotive 'El Camino Del Dolor' – these two have got something to say, and you're going to like it.

CARL GRIFFIN

Label Profile

Label: Moolakii Club Audio Interface
Location: Meols, Wirral, UK
Est: 2022

Potted History: "Moolakii Club was a name I made up in the 90s for a badly planned weekly hip hop/drum 'n' bass night in Doncaster, which disappeared after a few months," says label founder Jez Thelwell. "Fast-forward to the 2020s, when the label came about as a response to the amount of great electronica around with no listeners. I wanted to share these artists with the handful of beautiful people who had picked up my own self-releases.

"The experimental scene is really positive. I have no qualms about the DIY and frankly haphazard goings-on at the label. It's all about being true to what you are and your own creativity. If you want a professional job – go to the professionals. If you want a wild ride on the precipice of disaster, join the Moolakii Club."

Mission Statement: "Here is our ridiculously contrived acrostic manifesto. Manifest physical releases for peripheral and underground experimental electronica artists on cassette and CD. Celebrate raw and authentic DIY electronica and maintain the DIY ethos. Amplify peripheral and underground experimental electronica via our label zine and online presence. Incubate and spotlight this talent."

Key Artists & Releases: "It began with my own moniker Loopatronica and then came Mode 7 Project, Bone Music, Mihaly Wulfen, Hyacinth, TWGX – now Gneiss, Ogle, Cabbaggage and Thought Bubble, with more still to come. The MCAI philosophy is to approach artists with little following. If others come looking, we're all ears. Bring in new people and then distribute that support to other marginal performers. Share the wealth.

"To this end, we release our annual 'Session Tapes' compilations – with the next one due in February – and a new initiative for a 'Sub-Club' compilation, which has been digital-only to the mailing list followers. We also do charity releases. The Pollinator double album raised £400 for Cheshire Wildlife Trust re-wilding projects, and we're hosting the forthcoming 'TfL' – curated by Bone Music – an album of works using London Underground field recordings, with proceeds to Centrepoint, the homeless charity. And zines – because who doesn't love a little paper booklet with updates, reviews, recipes, interviews and other stuff?"

Future Plans: "To keep finding and sharing amazing, undiscovered music," says Thelwell. "We have our first live event in Birkenhead on 24 February, with a line-up featuring artists and DJs from the label. Mc:le is an all-day festival of experimental electronica for £6, tickets are available via our Bandcamp page."

Any Other Business? "Build it and they will come. Love each other and support creativity in all its guises. Come on – join the Moolakii Club."

For more, visit moolakiiclubaudiointerface.bandcamp.com

First And Last And Always

Optimo's **JD Twitch** on the first and last albums he bought, plus an all-time favourite

FIRST

VARIOUS ARTISTS
Action Replay
K-TEL, 1978

"The first was a TV-advertised Top 40 compilation bought on tape called 'Action Replay' that kick-started my passion for music. It was 90 per cent junk, but it did introduce me to my first huge musical love – Blondie – turned me onto Devo, and contained the synth-tastic electronic disco delight that is 'Supernature' by Cerrone, a track I still love and play out 45 years later."

LAST

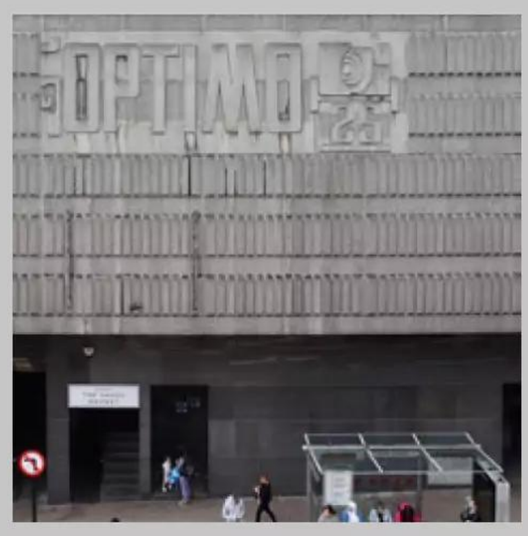
STATIC CLEANER LOST REWARD
Breathing Under Honey
LOW COMPANY, 2023

"Weirdo future electronics from another galaxy. From Jon Hassell-esque tones and DIY dub to bleached-out post-punk stylings and way beyond. Out of Melbourne, this brings together so many past and present things I love sonically. The result is something timeless, but it's also an album that could only have come out around about now."

ALWAYS

KEITH HUDSON
Playing It Cool & Playing It Right
JOINT INTERNATIONAL, 1981

"This album is canonical in my world. His take on the music of Jamaica is unlike anyone else's. He ripped up the rule book – from the style of his vocals to the production and instrumentation. Often it feels like it's collapsing in on itself, and the dubbing is a different kind of dub – more akin to Cabaret Voltaire's 'Sluggin' Fer Jesus' than 'King Tubbys Meets Rockers Uptown'. Most of the tracks are older Hudson ones revisited and then taken out into deep, deep space."



VARIOUS ARTISTS
Optimo 25 (Parts 1 & 2)
ABOVE BOARD PROJECTS

Adventurous and weird club cuts

Jonnie Wilkes and JD Twitch are Optimo, a DJ duo whose Sunday night events at Glasgow's Sub Club changed clubbing forever. Their party Optimo (Espacio) started in 1997 in reaction to the po-faced seriousness and superstar DJ excess that was happening in dance music at the time, offering a very different kind of experience and soundtrack. It ran weekly for 550 events until 2010, and over the years it brought together a dedicated, steadily growing audience who adored the anything-goes, yet expertly curated musical selections.

Wilkes and JD Twitch remain a vital force in the UK's underground (their club night has been resurrected and is currently still going strong at Glasgow's Berkeley Suite nightclub) and this two-volume compilation celebrates just some of their favourites over 25 years of DJing together. These are tracks that electrified, dazzled and happily confused the Sub Club dancefloor, and many other places they've played at since.

Putting your finger on what comprises the Optimo sound is tricky. It's more of a feeling, a counterculture attitude that taps into the values embodied by post-punk, disco and left-field electronic dance. The music collected here offers a little window into their world, linking some of the many genres and artists you might hear them play.

Here, everything from dusty psychedelic rarities to neglected bargain bin finds get their chance to shine. 'Part 1' shows just how daring their selections have been. 'Places Of Light' by Brainticket is a bizarre, flute-laden slab of kosmische fantasy funk, and African Head Charge's 'No, Don't Follow Fashion' is a percussive dub-disco curio. Robert Rental's 'Double Heart' is a murky, minimal, early 1980s post-punk gem, while Smokin' Cheeba's 'When I Was A Youth' is a reggae-inflected, 2-step garage bop.

'Part 2' is similarly wide-ranging, opening with the spiky electronics of Chris & Cosey's 'Take Control', moving through Mike Dunn's acid-flecked house cut 'Life Goes On' and Divine's riotous hi-NRG number 'Shake It Up'. It all ends on the track that gave them their name, Liquid Liquid's 'Optimo'. Tunes like these, and the open-minded adventurousness of Wilkes and JD Twitch, have made the dancefloor a far more exciting place to be.

BEN MURPHY

HIROSHI YOSHIMURA
Surround
TEMPORAL DRIFT

Originally released in 1986, Hiroshi Yoshimura's 'Surround' was the product of a commission by the Misawa Institute of Research and Development, with a remit that involved exploring ways to make their range of prefab homes feel even homelier. The result is an album which feels like the perfect iteration of Japanese ambient minimalism, one of several records which, alongside the work of Haruomi Hosono and Ryuichi Sakamoto, helped set out the parameters of the genre.

Listening again to this reissue of 'Surround', which comes via the consistently excellent Temporal Drift, what's striking is how beautifully Yoshimura's sounds conjure a sense of physical space. It opens with 'Time After Time', a series of melodic chimes which reverberate and echo as though ringing through marble corridors and sunlit halls with high ceilings. On 'Something Blue' and 'Green Shower', I imagine their rippling synths and cascading melodic lines washing through those Misawa Institute homes, certain that Yoshimura more than fulfilled the brief. **ST**

VARIOUS ARTISTS
PRIMARY FOREST 01
CEE

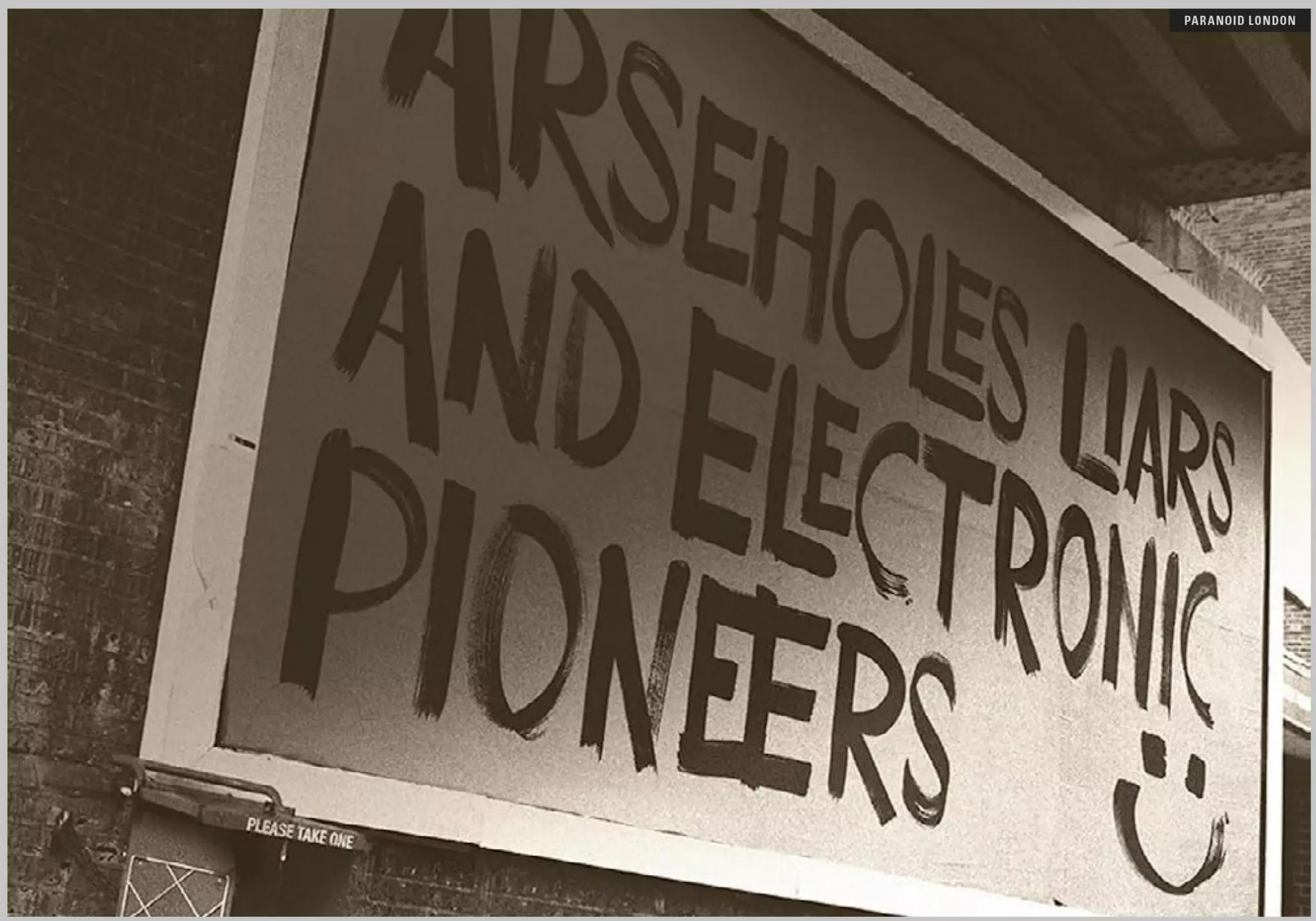
What links contemporary Barcelona with early 1990s Sheffield? Both have birthed pioneering electronic music labels, and you could argue that the Catalan city's answer to Warp Records is the Lapsus imprint. They've released albums from Pye Corner Audio and Suzanne Ciani, alongside homegrown talent such as RRUCCULLA and label owner Wooky. Lapsus also spawned the CEE sub-label, which has now been reborn as a multidisciplinary artistic collective with this new compilation.

'PRIMARY FOREST 01' explores concepts of technology and nature as interconnected ecosystems, but your brain is unlikely to absorb that while being battered by seven brutally jagged hybrids of bass music and techno of the sort you'd more readily associate with labels like Hessle Audio. Pépe's self-explanatory 'Hard' whirls around a drum machine vortex similar to Plastikman's 'Spastik', Delay Grounds' 'Doumo' could easily be banged out at Berghain, and – far from sounding like someone hugging a tree – DJ Fucci's 'Romance Intergaláctico' feels as if he's wielding a chainsaw across the dancefloor. **PC**

STELLARAYS
Winter Resort Music
CASTLES IN SPACE

There's an impossibly dark shadow hanging over this impeccable collection. Stellarays main man Bruno De Sousa died in March 2023, aged only 50. This wonderfully realised tribute to the heyday of sophisticated easy listening, recorded during his final months, has been released with the blessing of his partner and bandmate Corinna, and is the first of three planned posthumous albums on Castles In Space.

And what a glorious collection it is. The focus is firmly on après-ski, with the likes of 'Futuristic Toboggan' and 'The Chalet Cafeteria' combining exquisite synth melodies with Bontempi beats. Think Jean-Jacques Perrey on the cinnamon schnapps. 'Winter Love' is a genuinely touching seduction, all snaking woodwind and vinyl crackles. There are darker moments too, with both 'Ski Documentary Theme' and 'VHS Avalanche Film Crew' heralding ominous rumblings in the mountains. But all told, it's a crackling log fire of an album on a freezing day, and a heartwarming celebration of Bruno De Sousa's talents. **BF**



PARANOID LONDON
Arseholes, Liars And Electronic Pioneers
ROUGH TRADE

"And now, we move on to liars." The title of the third Paranoid London LP could be a deliberate, or perhaps just inadvertent, reference to Father Ted's touch-too-triumphant speech on receiving the Golden Cleric award. Either way, there's no doubt that the duo Gerardo Delgado and Quinn Whalley are every bit as intent on putting the world to rights as Ted was on Craggy Island. Not for nothing are a grimacing Boris Johnson, a scowling Donald Trump and a stony-faced Priti Patel included on the patchwork of photos that make up the album's artwork. But the music itself makes the biggest statement.

While there's plenty of the rough-edged, punk rock acid house – see closing anthem 'Suck A Dick' with long-time collaborator Mutado Pintado – the album format allows for occasional diversions like the blissed-out 'Screamadelica'-esque 'People (Ah Yeah)' with Bobby Gillespie and the speedy, Jennifer Touch-voiced 'Touch The State Of That'. Also worthy of mention are Joe Love's ode to onanism, 'Love One Self', and the quivering, brutal 'GRNDR'. Unmissable. **BW**

CULT OF WEDGE
Witchcraft In The Middle Of England
BANDCAMP

The West Midlands boasts a proud tradition of luxuriantly hairy weirdies making glorious pop music. Roy Wood, ELO, Slade… to their number add Pete Hackett, whose Cult Of Wedge albums are joyous throwbacks to a time when Funny Feet lollies dripped unapologetically down parka sleeves. "In the event of my sudden death / After they bury me below the deck," he sings on the opening track 'The Enfield Poltergeist'. "You can sell my clothes and hat and scarves / But don't ditch my records or my guitars."

This heady combination of classic pop and melancholy morbidity pervades the whole rather splendid shebang, with the suburban occultism of the title track even sounding like peak-era Wings. It's an album of Sparks keyboards, Ringo drum fills, jingly-jangly guitars and basslines that go "plink", and Hackett is defiant in his retro obsession. "Don't tell me to grow up / I can act like a child if I want," he sings on 'Born In The 70s'. "See I just can't understand / Why you don't sell Strawberry Wagon Wheels in this shop". Quite. **BF**

VARIOUS ARTISTS
Attack Release Volume One
WERRA FOXMA

In July 2022, Ty Lumnus (producer and artist Fraser Rowan) and Gaming (community musician and radio presenter Alan Bryden) started up a monthly electronic music group at the Bloc+ club in Glasgow. Priding themselves on their inclusivity, and welcoming with open arms many artists who have never performed before, they called the group Attack Release. This album on Scotland's own Werra Foxma label comprises 18 tracks that were recorded live at their various events.

As is to be expected, there is an enormous amount of variety here, causing you to ponder whether 18 tracks is a touch ambitious when it comes to retaining any sort of cohesion throughout the collection. Take each track and artist on their own merit, however, and you'll find some serious compositional talent at work, notably within the mellow grooves of I Am Blip's 'Gagarin' and the warm, iridescent synthwave twinkles of The Unperson's 'Bodacious'. 'Attack Release Volume One' might be a little on the mercurial side, but the collective spirit it stems from cannot be faulted. **IB**

SPEEDY J
Ginger
WARP

30th anniversary reissue of an IDM classic

"Artificial intelligence" has become a byword for tedious tech bros teasing us with deepfakes and self-crashing Teslas. But back in the olden days, it was the name that changed the face of British techno. Warp Records' 'Artificial Intelligence' series had us snoozing on sinewaves with home-listening highs from Aphex Twin, Richie Hawtin and Autechre.

Speedy J's 'Ginger' was the sixth in the series, and the first by an artist from mainland Europe. The Dutch producer seemed to take his tone from The Black Dog's 'Bytes' (AI number three). It was flat-capped and dour, yet decidedly fractal and futuristic in nature. He may come from Rotterdam, but Speedy – real name Jochem Paap – was oh-so Sheffield.

For one thing, this album is in a right old mood. For example, listen to the buttock-tense tribal percussion egged on by the fuzzbox bass on 'Ginger'. Or sandy chords giving way to the claustrophobic acid on 'Perfect Pitch', like Ibiza swarmed by locusts. And the sheer attitude of 'Flashback', evoking Orbital throwing a tantrum while recording 'Planet Of The Shapes'.

Speedy really gets up to, er, speed when he's got his club clogs on. 'Beam Me Up!' is a laser-powered disco jam, with comically chattering voices adding levity to a supremely funky Reuben Wilson organ sample. Then there's the double whammy of 'Pepper' and 'De-Orbit'. The former's chords sound like Cosmic Baby caught in the throes of ecstasy, the bass panning with delirious abandon. 'De-Orbit', originally a B-side on a Plus 8 Records 12-inch, somehow tops this. Squeaky sinewaves burble and gurgle while flat-footed breakbeats tumble over each other. Those breakbeats? Sampled from Kool & The Gang.

Later in the 1990s, Speedy would morph into an asbestos-crumbled techno grump, with impressive results on 'Public Energy No 1'. In contrast, it's the carefree sampling, and the track title nods to popular sci-fi (looking at you, R2-D2), that give 1993's 'Ginger' a naive warmth. Yet it's still so brain-crushingly alien, an aspect perhaps emphasised by the stark cover design by The Designers Republic. The 'Artificial Intelligence' series installed a dancefloor on our hearth, but this album also cracked open a vortex to another dimension on our mantelpiece.

FAT ROLAND

KREIDLER
Twists (A Visitor Arrives)
BUREAU B

Düsseldorf's other favourite sons return

A band from Düsseldorf named after a German motorbike manufacturer was always likely to have a strong motorik element. That's certainly the case on Kreidler's 13th studio album 'Twists (A Visitor Arrives)', though we are in territory that's more abstract and, at times, more ambitious than we might have become accustomed to.

For a group who celebrate 30 years together this year with just one line-up change (bassist Stefan Schneider hopped off to focus on his other band To Rococo Rot in the late-1990s) to still be breaking new ground is to be applauded.

Kreidler do appear to be enjoying a renaissance. 2022's fairly straight-ahead 'Spells And Daubs' – recorded during lockdown – could certainly be classified as neo-krautrock or krautrock-adjacent. With that fine latter-day album in place, they've pushed on and evolved with this, their seventh LP for Hamburg label Bureau B.

Is it a concept album? An imaginary soundtrack to a film that has yet to be made? Kreidler aren't giving too much away, but the cinematic scope of the music and the inscrutable titles certainly suggest a noirish sci-fi thriller of the imagination. It's all left open-ended enough that the listener can presumably project onto it what they will.

On the opener 'Polaris', they take the foot off the gas. It's a track with an uncharacteristic air of polished sophisti-pop about it. Hard on its heels comes the sax-saturated 'Tanger Telex', with Mick Karn-like fretless meanderings making everything that much smoother and more melty.

Guests get on board for rare vocal outings, such as Khan Of Finland bringing a human element to the robotically funky 'Loisaida Sisters'. 'Arithmétique' is perhaps most fun of all though – a pacey instrumental soundscape of arabesque arpeggios and precise polyrhythms that acts as a kind of thrilling centrepiece. It's soon offset by the dark spoken word of 'Hands', performed by Georgian musician Natalie Beridze.

Given the group's dalliances with radical left-wing politics and performance poetry in the early 90s, this new record feels like the biggest re-examination of what they do in a long while. 'Twists (A Visitor Arrives)' is certainly driving, though where you'll end up remains a mystery throughout, and it's all the more enjoyable for it.

JEREMY ALLEN

REVIEWS BY
JEREMY ALLEN,
IMOGEN BEBB,
SCOTT BLIXEN,
PAUL CLARKE,
BOB FISCHER,
CLAIRE FRANCIS,
CARL GRIFFIN,
VELIMIR ILIC,
FREDDIE HUDSON,
BEN MURPHY,
FAT ROLAND,
WILL SIMPSON,
MAT SMITH,
ANTHONY THORNTON,
SPENSER TOMSON,
BEN WILLMOTT

BRIEF ENCOUNTERS

Carmen Burguess and Tomás Nochteff, aka **Mueran Humanos**, take on this month's round of quick-fire questions

INTERVIEW: NEIL MASON

Hello Carmen, hello Tomás. Where are you right now and what can you see?
Carmen: "I am in Buenos Aires. I can see photos of my relatives, and there's one of me as a child emerging from the sea like a little monster looking for someone to eat. A terrifying creature."
Tomás: "I am in my kitchen. I can see the snow-covered roofs of Neukölln, Berlin, through the window."

We're big fans, but have always wondered about your name. It translates as "Die Humans" – not a very friendly message, is it?
Tomás: "It's just a little black humour, a bit of science fiction, a bit demented preacher, maybe mystical if you are of that disposition. I am puzzled when people think it is some sort of serious statement. Really? If I wanted to kill people, I wouldn't be in a band… would I?"

It sounds way better in Spanish than English, doesn't it?
Tomás: "When we started, I wasn't thinking that people outside the Spanish-speaking world would listen, so I didn't ask myself how it sounded in English. But nobody can pronounce it! People say 'Hermanos', I cringe every time I hear that. Well, too late to change it now."

You're based in Berlin, what prompted the move from Latin America?
Tomás: "We moved separately for personal reasons – adventure mostly. I lived in London and Barcelona and we landed together in Berlin, and then we started the band. Back in 2008, Berlin was a very artist-friendly city with low rents and a big, accessible music and arts scene. Nowadays, being way more expensive and trendy, it's less so."

The new release 'Reemplazante' is only your fourth album. Good things come to those who wait, eh?
Tomás: "I know! Every time we finish a record I say, 'OK, we have all these leftover songs, let's do another album in six months', but it never happens. We will only release something if it's good enough, artistically. We've discarded entire albums before and started again because we weren't 100 per cent happy."
Carmen: "It's not as if there are people glued to the walls of our houses with their mouths open and drooling, waiting for a new album from us. Oh wait! I take that back, I found one of those zombies, I will throw them a musical bone!"

Tell us about the Shark keyboard you used to compose the new album's songs
Carmen: "One morning, I woke up with an inexplicable hunch and started looking for instruments on Kleinanzeigen, the platform used by most musicians in Berlin. I found an advert for an almost toy-like keyboard, so I decided to go and look, and several strange things happened on the mission.

"I found the building where the keyboard was, and it was number 13. Inside there was a lift, doors wide open with a glow of golden light that I found paranormally bright. Then a young, bare-chested man appeared with the uncased keyboard under his arm. It was grey like a shark, and I held out €20. That changed my life forever!"

There was also a toy amp that you found in the street?
Tomás: "Carmen started writing songs on that keyboard and the sound wasn't too loud on its built-in speakers, so I couldn't play bass on my big Ampeg amp. We found this little toy amp on the street years ago when we moved here. It sounds cool, so that's how we wrote all the songs. Having fewer options helps you to focus. Then we moved to our rehearsal space and 'translated' the music to our usual instruments."

Love the track 'Cadenas De La Infancia', which has a real Joy Division feel. How important was that UK post-punk/new wave scene to your own music?
Tomás: "It was the first music I chose to listen to myself. When I was about 12, I felt drawn to punks. I liked how they looked. I tried to get what I thought were punk records. I got PiL's 'Live In Tokyo' followed by 'My Life In The Bush Of Ghosts' by Eno and Byrne. Those two records made sense to me. I thought, 'This sounds like spiky hair and anarchy'.

"When I finally listened to a 'proper' punk record I found them too much like music my parents would like. So I kept looking for the weirder stuff, then at some point I got 'Closer' by Joy Division and it blew my head off. That record definitely inspired me to start a band. I never wanted to emulate them, but they're part of me in a sense, so it shows sometimes."

Music journalists do like a comparison. Our Reviews Ed says you're the Latin American Chris & Cosey. Do you see the parallels between your work?
Carmen: "Sure, I love them. Thank you."
Tomás: "I don't mind being compared to them, it is honourable. Other people say we remind them of The Cramps. We love The Cramps. First time Carmen came round to my house she brought a Cramps book and a CD by The Fall. I thought, 'This is it'."

Who else do you get compared to?
Tomás: "Suicide, usually. Martin Rev likes Mueran Humanos – I am very proud of that. He said, 'When I see these two and their wonderful music, I see my people'. It's on YouTube, look it up. We're told all the time that our music is a mix of this and that, but we don't mix genres on purpose. I would worry if everybody compared us to the same thing over and over. Luckily, it doesn't happen."

'Reemplazante' is released by Sterbt Menschen on 14 February

CHORD

Chord Electronics Ltd.

Mojo 2

PRODUCT OF THE YEAR
PRICE OF THE CENTURY

With **£200** off, there's never been a better time to buy the 'Product of the Year' Mojo 2 and Poly streamer. Whether in your system, on your desktop, or in your pocket, Mojo 2 and Poly will enhance your music listening experience instantly.

Made in BRITAIN established 1989